

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



XVI

Author: **Ryota Hori**

Illustrator: **bob**



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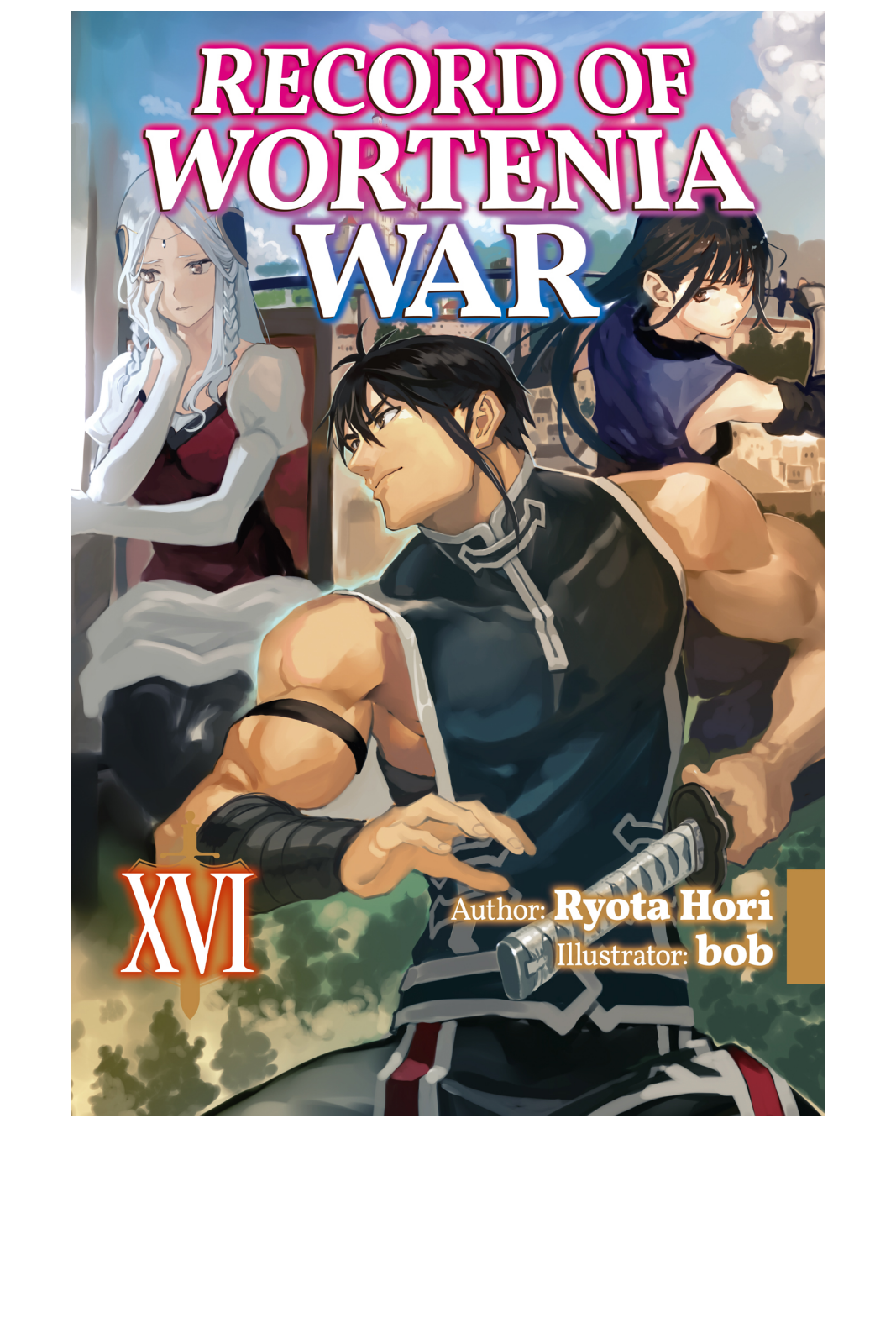


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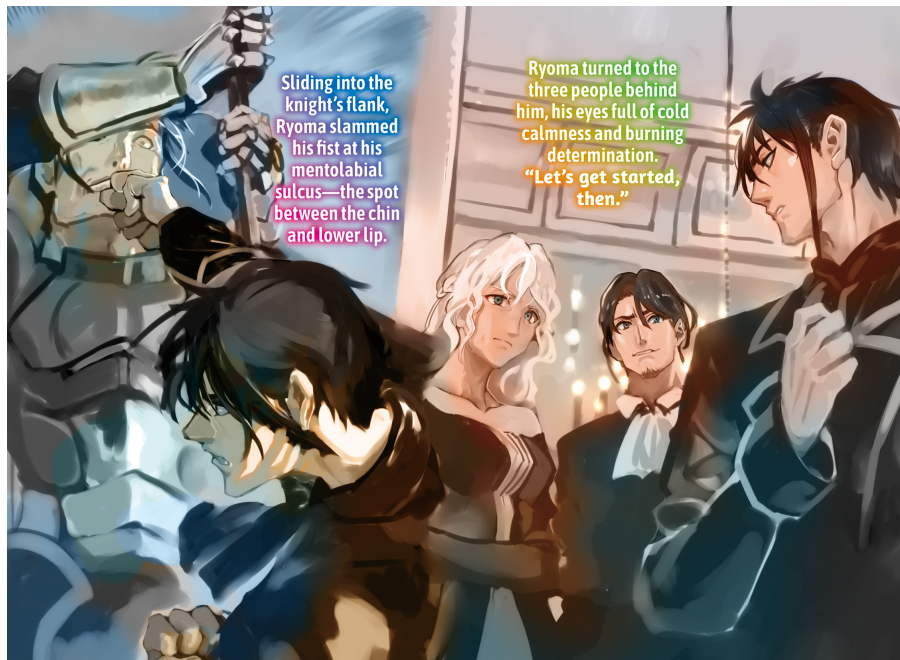
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Plenty of
women sought
Ryoma's
masculine
attention...

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Sliding into the knight's flank, Ryoma slammed his fist at his mentolabial sulcus—the spot between the chin and lower lip.

Ryoma turned to the three people behind him, his eyes full of cold calmness and burning determination. "Let's get started, then."



“You seriously think Mikoshiba would make such a naive decision?”

“No, I think the chances of that are slim.”

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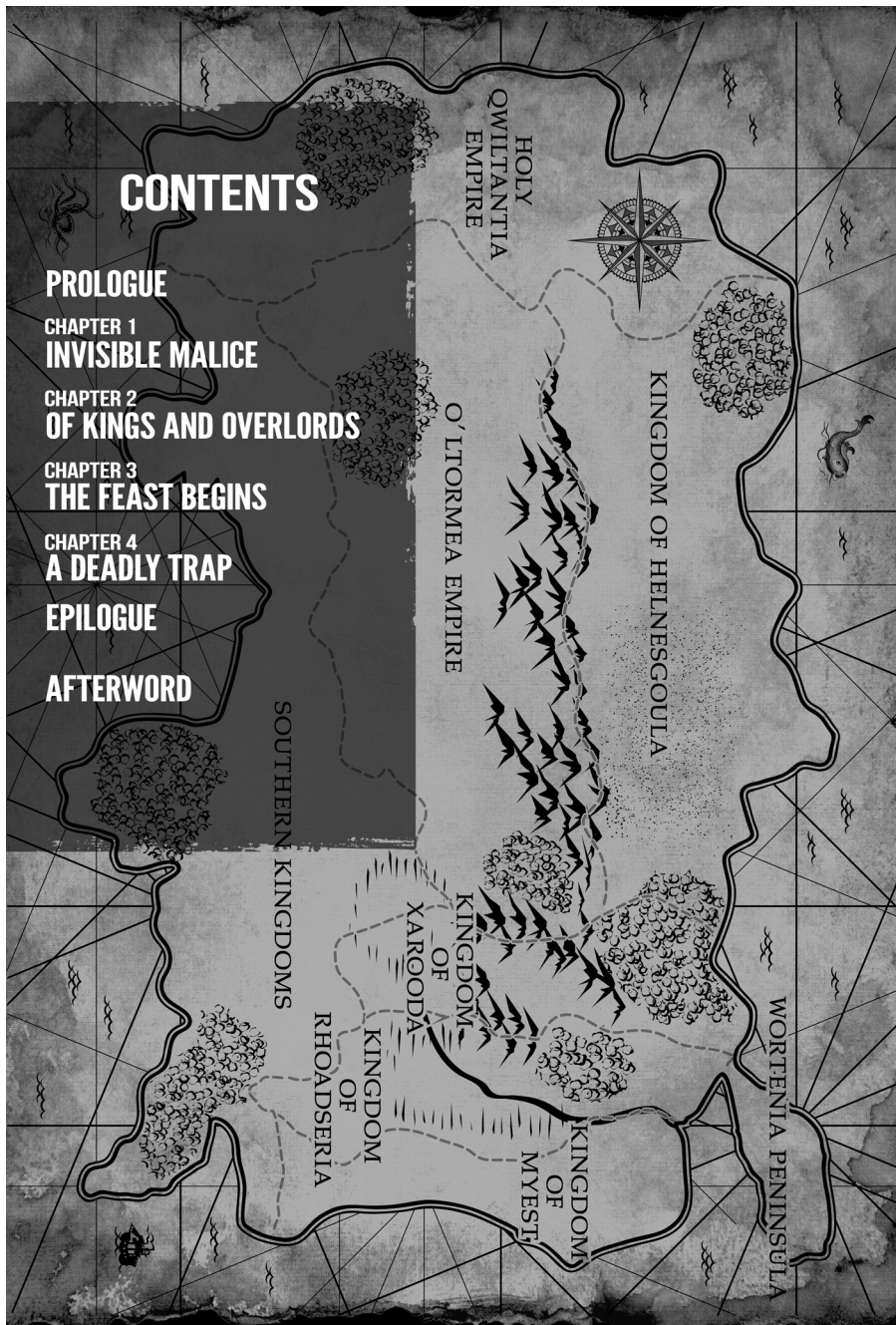
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Prologue

Pearly white clouds hung over the northern mountain range, but the sun still shone through, lighting up the forest treetops. A warm breeze rustled the leaves, and a brook murmured nearby. This abundance of nature—at times kind, at times harsh—greeted whoever stepped onto this land, but whether nature was peaceful was a matter of luck.

That was a scene from the past, however. Now, barrier pillars stood on both sides of the paved road to protect travelers from monster attacks.

It's been a while since I've been here, but this area really has changed.

The feeling of returning home filled Dilphina's heart, and she smiled self-deprecatingly. She felt a twinge of sorrow as she recalled the scenery from her memories. This road led from the city of Sirius, which was still under development, to the center of the Wortenia Peninsula and all the way to her village. She'd just passed by a horse-drawn carriage on its way to Sirius a short while ago.

It wasn't too long ago when she had to walk through these woods with the utmost of caution. Monsters could pounce out of any bush, after all. Things were different now, though. The roads weren't absolutely safe, but the barrier pillars did make them more secure. She felt safe enough to look around and relish in the memories of what this area used to look like.

I used to hate this cursed land so much, but now I feel almost sad to see it changed. It's strange how emotions work.

Dilphina never would've imagined this scenery a few years ago. One's homeland held a special place in their heart, and Dilphina's people, who'd lived in this inhospitable land for years to avoid humans, were no exception to that rule.

I think the others with me feel the same way.

Dilphina glanced at her comrades, who were following behind her. Perhaps sensing her gaze, the vice commander of her unit, Eustia, looked at her questioningly.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.



Dilphina nodded softly, looked around for a moment, and shrugged. "I was just thinking how strange it was. We were only gone for a few months, but this place has changed a lot. I couldn't help but feel amused by how emotional I've become."

Dilphina was confused by the impulse surging in her heart, but she realized that was how she truly felt.

None of my memories here are good ones, but...

The dark elf clan led by Nelcius, Dilphina's father, lost to the humans in the holy war some four centuries ago. After that, Nelcius's clan along with the others were driven to this peninsula, and since then, they knew nothing but trials and tribulations.

Dilphina and her generation weren't yet born at that time, so they didn't have to face the hardships that led their clan to this blasted land, but Nelcius and the elders told them of their misery so many times that they'd grown tired of hearing of it. Besides, living in Wortenia meant one would inevitably part with those dear to them, and Dilphina wasn't the only one who'd experienced that pain.

Eustia is 221 years old, and Isolde, the youngest of us, is serving as the rear guard. If I recall, she's turning 189 this year? I suppose that's old enough.

The average age among members of Dilphina's unit was two hundred. To humans, they were staggeringly old, but to elves, they were still immature young women. An elf's life span was ten times that of a human, so the very perception of age was different between the two races.

It took decades for an elf to grow to physical maturity, and for a millennium after that, they resembled a human in their twenties. They only started looking like elderly humans when their life span was about to run out. While there was no comparing a dark elf's age to a human's, a two-hundred-year-old elf was akin to a twenty-year-old human.

All members of Dilphina's unit, Dilphina included, had gone through the coming-of-age ritual, but most of the adults didn't consider them adults yet. They weren't children, but they still lacked maturity. That assessment wasn't meant to offend them, though. As a matter of fact, when it came to their mental ages, they weren't quite adults yet. They were still too young to understand the transience and hardships of life.

But that was good enough for now. A century had passed since the youngest of them, Isolde, came into her own, and in that time, they'd all lived in the Wortenia Peninsula, among the terrible monsters of terrifying size and strength. It was a difficult way to survive—practically a living hell.

We hardly have any fond memories to speak of.

The best memories Dilphina could remember were learning the spear from her father and hunting for food. She mastered the spear so she could survive and hunted down prey so she could put food on the table. Such an existence was by no means fun or pleasant.

All I can remember is...battling monsters.

Monsters were a constant threat to those living in the Wortenia Peninsula. The dark elves protected their village with their advanced thaumaturgy, producing a multilayered defensive barrier. They created it using skills unique to dark elves, so it was more powerful than anything the humans could produce. Thanks to that, the dark elves were able to live deep within the peninsula while evading pursuit from the humans.

Still, their barrier was far from perfect. It was strong, but it couldn't fully protect the village from the mightiest, most colossal of monsters. Every decade or so, a phenomenon called a stampede took place, when monsters across the peninsula were overtaken by bloodlust. In fact, during one such stampede, Dilphina saw her mother die before her very eyes.

On top of that, the dark elves' diet consisted mostly of meat. They had tried their hand at agriculture, but given the living conditions in Wortenia, there was only so much land they could cultivate. Therefore, hunting became their main source of gathering food. However, factors such as environment and the time of year inevitably influenced their hunting activities, and because of that, many of Dilphina's friends had succumbed to illness and hunger. The memories of their demise were burned into Dilphina's mind.

But even though the Wortenia Peninsula invoked those memories, Dilphina still saw it as home.

If he knew of this homesickness, he would surely laugh at me. He might even say he's envious of me.

Smiling bitterly, she recalled the teasing smile of the young man who might someday rule over all the demi-humans in Wortenia. He was also a victim of human malice; he'd been taken from his homeland by force. He hadn't mentioned the emotions in his heart yet, and perhaps not even the dark-skinned twins who always followed him like shadows knew the true extent of how he felt.

I do think we've learned to be frank with him by now, though.

In the past, Dilphina had been somewhat distant and reserved with him because of their difference in race, and her time spent as the pirates' captive had merely increased her dislike of humans. But, maybe because he understood how she felt, Ryoma had moderately yet persistently continued to engage her in friendly conversation. Thanks to that, she'd grown much more accustomed to his presence.

It didn't just end there either. Dilphina and Ryoma were in the midst of forming a close relationship, at least as friends, if not something more. At times, they shared a table, and in some cases, they even shared the bedroom. The latter wasn't in any way sexual; she merely served as his bodyguard.

I do think he trusts me. He wouldn't keep me nearby if he didn't. But maybe I should be more assertive.

Ryoma's willingness to let her guard his bedroom meant that he accepted and relied on her. People had to sleep, and they were defenseless when they did, so he must have trusted those he relied on to keep him safe.

Dilphina had no qualms with the fact that he trusted her like this. She was a demi-human, so Baron Mikoshiba was putting his reputation on the line by associating with her. The Church of Meneos had little influence in the continent's east, but there was still a great deal of prejudice toward demi-humans.

That was why, even when his forces assaulted an O'tormean transport convoy in the Xaroodian mountains, Dilphina had kept her hood on and made sure to slay all the soldiers she fought. Plus, a mysterious, unknown figure slaying the enemy gave her a sense of mysticism.

But the main reason I did that was to hide the Mikoshiba barony's association with demi-humans in general, and with my clan in particular.

Because of this, Dilphina and her forces—known as the Black Serpent unit—were mostly tasked with guarding Ryoma. As his guards, they were regarded as elites, and they were expected to always be ready for combat. Even during times of peace, they were to be fully armed and armored at all times, which meant they always wore helmets hiding their facial features.

Even during the recent siege of Epirus, the Black Serpents had worked alongside the Igasaki ninjas to sweep the interior of the castle. They weren't fighting on the forefront like the usual soldiers, where they could gain merit and glory in battle, but instead were working behind the scenes as special forces.

A day will come when our alliance will be made public, I'm sure, but...

Dark elves had exceptional physical prowess, and they were skilled at chanting verbal thaumaturgy. If a dark elf were to seriously duel either Robert or Signus, they would certainly put up a good fight even against such exemplary human warriors. Ryoma's resources were far too limited to not use the elves' strength, but it didn't change the fact that there was little for them to do right now.

Dilphina and her subordinates were exceedingly powerful in one-on-one fights. They could mask their presence and stealthily hunt down their prey in the dark woods. With that in mind, Dilphina and

her subordinates seemed most suited to infiltrating the enemy, but the battlefield was a different story.

The Black Serpents had only twenty or so members. In Ryoma Mikoshiba's military organization, each platoon was made up of a group of five soldiers, and ten platoons formed a company. The Black Serpents were just four platoons, so they were an exceedingly small force. If they wanted to influence and overturn battles, they would need to have at least one hundred members.

Furthermore, while they had plenty of combat experience, it was mostly from battling monsters. The only experience they had with other humanoids was fighting the pirates that once hid away in the Wortenia Peninsula.

Expecting the Black Serpents to fight in accordance with another species's military conventions was asking too much. Much like dropping a wrench into a machine, forcing the elves to adopt human organization and tactics could cause problems and malfunctions. Nevertheless, fighting without gaining any merit for it didn't sit well with Dilphina and the Black Serpents. It went against their honor and dignity. Thus, the situation they were currently in was Ryoma's attempt at a compromise.

We still want more chances to earn additional achievements in battle.

Dilphina didn't fault Ryoma for their current situation. Trying to force the demi-humans to work with humans could completely destroy their tentative peace. Considering the racial differences and history between the humans and the elves, it made sense that Ryoma was being cautious.

The problem with being Ryoma's guards was that so long as Ryoma wasn't attacked, they had no chance to make a name for themselves. Plus, covert missions like attacking Epirus were often spearheaded by the Igasaki ninjas. Dilphina was one of the strongest in her clan, second only to her father the chief, and to her, the current situation felt terribly ambiguous

When all is said and done, the immediate problems are...

Dilphina was dissatisfied with the current situation, but she recognized the advantages of it as well. Being Ryoma's guard meant she had to remain close to him, which made it easier to build trust with him. If nothing else, she was gradually building up merit with him. Nonetheless, it fulfilled only half of the task Nelcius had given her.

At first, I suspected he wasn't attracted to women, but according to Sir Boltz and Mike, that's not the case.

Being a demi-human had many advantages, but it also had its share of flaws. The fact that a human led the Mikoshiba barony was one of those flaws. The events of the past still affected the demi-

humans' relationship with mankind, even four centuries later. Considering Nelcius's position, giving his daughter to Ryoma would significantly solidify the dark elves' standing, and the easiest way to do that would be through marriage. However, Nelcius's plan wasn't bearing any fruit yet.

A child between me and that man? Not to spoil father's plan, but even if that were to happen, it would be years down the line.

Dilphina had tried to appeal to Ryoma in all sorts of ways, but it was to no avail, and it just left her feeling very weary. It hurt her womanly pride to an extent, but knowing that she wasn't the only woman Ryoma was shunning did help abate it.

Since she'd spent her life in the village within the forest, Dilphina hadn't needed to exhibit much feminine charm so far. This wasn't a comment on her appearance, of course, but prior to this she hadn't really been aware of her sexuality as a woman. That wasn't to say she stubbornly dismissed men and thought women were superior. She just didn't feel the need to prove herself better than the opposite gender. She always acted true to herself, never forcing herself to prove anything.

Still, Dilphina was considered curt and frigid, as if a wall around her heart was pushing others away. Plus, being the chief's daughter and second only to him in strength greatly influenced the way those around her viewed her. The men of her clan never treated her much like a woman; they merely saw her as a warrior. From their perspective, Dilphina was a dear friend, a dependable comrade, and a reliable leader, but they were hardly aware of her as a member of the opposite sex.

Dilphina thought things were fine this way because she'd made an oath in her heart to one day follow in her father's footsteps and become chief. But she knew that a different emotion, one which she'd never felt before, was beginning to grow in her heart. She was surprised to realize that even though Ryoma was one of the humans she was supposed to hate, she respected him and felt a sense of friendship toward him. Even she noticed that an emotion beyond duty was budding in her heart.

It's funny. I never thought I'd harbor such emotions.

Despite claiming that she'd given up on those prospects, some part of her still sought a woman's happiness, so when her father told her to pursue Ryoma, she'd accepted his order without complaint.

There's no need to rush. Whenever he seeks my company in bed, I'll be ready to accept him. Although, I probably shouldn't do anything to earn the twins' ire.

Plenty of women sought Ryoma's masculine attention, the first being the Malfist sisters, but Sakuya of the Igasaki clan and Simone of

the Christof Company were also attracted to him. Dilphina was also wary of Lione and Lady Yulia Salzberg too.

Thankfully, none of them were too possessive, nor did they seem the type to be jealous. That didn't mean they'd let a woman get a leg up on them, though. They could accept not being his one and only, but they wouldn't tolerate being secondary to another woman.

Besides, neither Dilphina nor any of the Black Serpents could simply become Ryoma's wife. Or rather, they couldn't possibly be his legal spouse. In noble society, marriage was a means of tying two clans together. So compared to the twins, who had no family, and Simone, who was just a commoner, Dilphina theoretically had more of a chance. Sadly, the divide between demi-humans and humans got in the way of that.

Ryoma trusted them enough to charge them with his security, and for the time being, Dilphina ought to be satisfied with that. After all, she wasn't the only one pursuing Ryoma's affections. If Ryoma were to oblige, she'd gladly give herself to him, but it wouldn't be wise for her to be too assertive.

Thinking of a future with Ryoma made Dilphina flush with shame.
It all started on that day, when I first met him.

Dilphina met Ryoma for the first time back when the Wortenia Peninsula was still overrun by pirates. Dilphina had allowed the pirates to capture her so the village's younglings could escape, and during her imprisonment, she resigned herself to her fate and gave up.

Life for a slave was difficult enough as it was, and their master could do whatever they pleased. The one freedom a slave had was the freedom to end their own life, but even that could be taken away with a thaumaturgical seal.

What was worse, Dilphina was a demi-human. Dark elves were thought of as living jewels. Since they were born with larger prana reserves than a human, they aged slower and lived longer, but this precious, envious gift was a curse when they became slaves. A long life only had value when one was free, and a longer life span just prolonged a slave's suffering.

But meeting Ryoma Mikoshiba had changed Dilphina's fate. He hunted down the pirates and became sovereign of the Wortenia Peninsula.

How many months have passed since then? Dilphina pondered as she looked up at the clouds sailing overhead. *We helped the Igasaki clan in the Battle of Epirus, but that didn't match the glory we would've gotten on the battlefield, and it's hard to say if we did more than Gennou and his subordinates did.*

The flagstone road they were following opened up as they emerged into a clearing. Looking ahead, they saw a village protected

by a wooden fence and a moat. This was their home, Nelcius's village.

There's still much to consider, but for now, we just need to focus on the tasks he gives us. And this is the perfect chance to make ourselves seem more valuable to him. We must succeed.

Dilphina took a deep breath and then exhaled. Shrugging off the emotions bubbling up in her, she looked up to the sky, her heart full of resolve.



Seeing that his beloved daughter had returned to the village alive and well, Nelcius welcomed Dilphina into his room with a bright smile. Not even the savage warrior known as the Mad Demon could keep from smiling in this situation.

"You're back," he said as he rose from his chair and moved to a sofa in the corner of the room.

This was Nelcius's office, in his home near the center of the village. Though it was the chief's residence, it was a fairly plain home. It had two stories, but the only rooms besides the living room were his office and his bedroom.

Considering the dark elves' living conditions, a house that large was more than enough. They spent their days trying to forage just enough to live by, and they had little in the way of luxuries and entertainment. Homes were merely shelter from the elements, so having something like a kitchen was considered extravagant.

"Take a seat," Nelcius said as he sat on the sofa. He gazed fixedly at her as she took a seat opposite him. Their eyes remained locked for an indeterminate amount of time, until Nelcius added, "It's been a while since you've been here. I'm glad you're doing well."



Dilphina nodded. "I'm glad you seem to be doing fine too, father."

"Yes, every day has been so busy that I could hardly catch a breath, but I've managed, somehow..."

"I walked here from Sirius, and I noticed the land has changed a bit while I was away."

"Lord Boltz has been moving things along. Thanks to the road, delivering to Sirius is much easier than it used to be. But that aside, I've heard you distinguished yourself during the siege of Epirus. It's a good thing I sent you over, then."

"Distinguished myself?" Dilphina muttered, her expression clouding over with confusion and doubt.

She knew her father wouldn't be upset about her contributions, but she certainly didn't feel like she and her troops had done anything to merit praise either.

"No need to look so surprised," Nelcius continued. "True, you didn't turn the tides of battle, so I can understand how you feel, but with the position we're in, it would not have been wise to make a show of yourself now. Letting demi-humans act in the open would not be good for Lord Mikoshiba at present."

Nelcius rose from the sofa, walked over to his desk, and withdrew a letter from a drawer. "I have much to discuss with you, my dear, but this comes first." He then handed the letter to Dilphina. "It's from Lord Mikoshiba, delivered by Lord Boltz the other day. It details his deep gratitude for your assistance and exploits. He then apologizes that, given the situation, he cannot adequately reward you for your achievements."

"I see," Dilphina replied, nodding briefly as she scanned the letter.

There was no doubt that Wortenia's demi-humans were in a cooperative relationship with Ryoma Mikoshiba, who was expanding his influence from his base at Epirus, but it wasn't one of subordination. Yes, Dilphina acknowledged and respected Ryoma as her lord, but those were simply her personal feelings. Broadly speaking, Nelcius had sent Dilphina and her subordinates to help Ryoma, and they functioned similarly to mercenaries or guest generals in Ryoma's ranks. In modern society, they were like temporary employees in a company, though the lack of legal regulations meant that their positions were even less stable than that. Perhaps that was what prompted Ryoma to send this letter.

"He's apologized directly to us, as well," Dilphina said.

He'd done so shortly after the attack on Epirus was concluded. Dilphina could still remember his apology as he handed them a large sum of gold coins as their reward.

"He said he'd be more accommodating when trading with Sirius,

and that's after he's already been so generous with us in the past."

Nelcius smiled sardonically, but the next moment, his expression darkened. Normally, one would be happy to hear that their business partner would be more accommodating, but it seemed Nelcius wasn't unconditionally pleased with this. Dilphina could infer what her father was feeling from his expression.

"This probably goes without saying," Nelcius began, "but Lord Mikoshiba has shown no ill will toward us and has proven to be a lavish ally. So long as we keep our end of the deal, he will always repay us fairly and accordingly. We couldn't ask for a better business partner..." Nelcius trailed off, but then he sighed and continued. "But we shouldn't take that for granted, nor should we make light of Lord Mikoshiba. If we become impudent, he will surely cut ties with us."

This was Nelcius's true fear. He had no qualms or complaints with Ryoma himself, but conversely, he had a deep fear of him. Ryoma's ability as a ruler and statesman went far beyond Nelcius's.

As a warrior, Nelcius had never once thought of Ryoma as an unbeatable opponent. He realized that Ryoma was skilled and that mankind's capacity for growth matched the dark elves' longevity. Nelcius wouldn't underestimate a human because they were short-lived, but he didn't at all think he was inferior to Ryoma as a warrior.

But when it comes to our capacity as rulers...

In the four hundred years that passed since his defeat in the holy war, Nelcius had served as the clan's chief in this cursed land. It wasn't an easy path to follow for the warrior called the Mad Demon, but despite the difficulties, he'd competently lead his clan. In addition, he proved to be good at politics. But Nelcius still had to invest his every effort into protecting his clan from extinction. He couldn't offer his people the bright future that seemed promised to them now.

Trading with Sirius improved the living conditions of all the demi-human clans in the peninsula. The clans no longer needed to fear starvation, and they could obtain luxuries like cigarettes and alcohol. On the other hand, Nelcius couldn't confidently say he was Ryoma's match as a ruler. When he couldn't even lie to himself and claim that he was Ryoma's equal or superior, it was obvious who was the more capable leader.

He must have known that, Nelcius thought. And despite that, he's being considerate of me. He's probably doing it because of our suspicion of humans.

On the surface, the Mikoshiba barony and Nelcius's village were equal allies, but Ryoma seemed to be doing Nelcius favors at every turn, as if to demonstrate that Nelcius's side somehow had the upper hand. But this wasn't to say Ryoma feared Nelcius in any way. Sometimes he would back down and give Nelcius what he wanted,

while other times he'd be stubborn and unyielding. This constant change of rhythm proved that negotiations were more akin to a river's ebb and flow than a straight line. Their negotiations were like a battle of words between two masterful warriors.

"I'm sure you know this, father, but that man isn't naive enough to only ever give us the carrot without occasionally applying the stick," Dilphina said.

The letter praised Dilphina and the Black Serpents for their hard work while also praising the quality of the equipment Nelcius and the dark elves had produced for them. He thanked Nelcius for the cooperation, but the problem was what he wrote after that.

"You're right, Dilphina. Lord Mikoshiba is generous with his rewards, but in exchange, he makes taxing demands. With this request, maintaining both numbers and quality in such a short amount of time might be difficult."

Nelcius punctuated his words with a sigh. He looked like the president of a company stressed out by a large client's unreasonable demand.

"I understand. I was only sent back here this time because I'm in charge of the security and transportation of this delivery," Dilphina replied, directing a questioning gaze at her father. "How are the preparations for the articles in question going?"

Nelcius may have looked a little exhausted, but he didn't seem discouraged. And when Dilphina walked here from the village gate, the villagers were working as they usually did. Still, she had to be sure. If even one of the articles Ryoma asked for was missing, it could place the Mikoshiba barony in quite the predicament.

"For the Evening Dew Mushrooms and Moonlight Herbs, we picked the finest ones we've cultivated in the village," Nelcius said casually. "I doubt humans could find any with this quality. And our artisans have completed the utensils to which we'll apply the thaumaturgy."

If any guild officials were to hear what Nelcius just said, they would lunge at him in a frenzy. Evening Dew Mushrooms and Moonlight Herbs were ingredients for a healing nostrum, but they had other uses too, including being powerful antidotes. Due to their high demand, there weren't many of them circulating in the market.

In addition, the plants were difficult to cultivate artificially. They only grew naturally, but the environments that could accommodate them were limited. For that reason, they were highly sought after by the guild and could be sold for steep prices. The difficulty was that when grown naturally, their quality and quantity were inconsistent. This was one reason nostrums were so expensive and only available to the wealthy. If one could reliably cultivate them, however, things

would change, and nostrums could be produced all over the continent.

As for the utensils, they were each specially produced and inscribed with a thaumaturgical seal. They were high-class items worth their weight in gold, and normally, one couldn't gather so many of them even with lots of money.

In that regard, it was clear that Nelcius's delivery had a major influence on the Mikoshiba barony's prospects and future. But what Dilphina said wasn't about the Evening Dew Mushrooms or the Moonlight Herbs. She wasn't concerned about them to begin with, and Nelcius had already sent her a letter telling her they were ready for transport. It would have been odd if he hadn't gathered those materials at this point.

The problem lay with another product.

"Right. And what about the main issue?" Dilphina asked.

Sensing what his daughter was getting at from her intonation, Nelcius sighed. "To humans, all demi-humans look the same. I'm sure Lord Mikoshiba thinks negotiating with the other clans is easy for us, but our culture and values are different from theirs. Yes, we all fought together against the humans during the holy war, but since then, contact between us and them has been severed."

In all honesty, Ryoma had given them a problematic task, but they couldn't just give up and say it was impossible. The preferential treatment Ryoma had shown them in their negotiations up to now made them feel indebted to him. So even when the other demi-humans had wanted to cut off the negotiations, Nelcius had refused to back down. And those efforts were eventually rewarded.

"The negotiations were hard," Nelcius explained, "but we were able to get what we wanted in exchange for the tobacco and tea leaves Lady Simone prepared for us. For the time being, we've drained them of blood and stored them in freezing temperatures, as instructed."

"Then that means everything is in place..." Dilphina confirmed.

"Yes. All that remains is to deliver it to the royal capital."

"Understood. We don't have much time, so I'll confirm it was loaded properly and leave first thing tomorrow morning. I still have to pick up the rest of the goods from Alejandro in Sirius."

With that, Dilphina rose from the sofa, resolved to return to her beloved lord's side as soon as possible.

Chapter 1: Invisible Malice

That day, a force of three hundred soldiers clad in black armor stood before the gates of Pireas, the capital of Rhoadseria. All three hundred of them waited at the ready, filed in a perfect, unified formation. It was already afternoon, and the sun was beginning to tip west.

The soldiers only stood there, unmoving, but that demonstrated their skill as a unit. Simply standing might look easy enough, but standing at attention in an orderly formation was very different. The armor the soldiers wore weighed them down, and they weren't allowed to rest their legs or shift their weight, nor were they allowed to move their heads and look around at their surroundings.

Imagine, if you will, the Buckingham Palace guards in England. They constantly stand at attention, closely following their regulations, and never leave their stations, except for times of crisis or during shift changes. It's an impressive show of organization, dexterity, and skill.

The black-clad soldiers carried a banner of a two-headed snake with gold and silver scales and gleaming red eyes coiled around a sword. By now, everyone in Rhoadseria knew what this banner meant, and the sentinels guarding the capital's gate were no exception. They eyed the soldiers with stiff expressions, proof that they knew who they were facing, but given their duty as gatekeepers, they couldn't let Ryoma and his men cross without inspection. They needed proper approval from the palace to allow him to pass, especially considering Ryoma was leading a force of fully armed soldiers—albeit a relatively small one. If they did let them through, their heads would certainly—literally—be on the chopping block.

Of course, any other noble of Rearth would care little for these guards and try to force their way through. The sentinels served the kingdom, so their social standing was higher than that of a regular commoner living in the capital, but it was still nowhere near that of a noble. Most of the sentinels were high-ranking commoners, and if any of them belonged to the nobility, they were only low-ranking knights. Ryoma, however, knew of their predicament and chose not to act oppressively.

A group of carriages that had arrived after Ryoma and his forces was just finishing the entrance procedures and passing through the gates, while Ryoma's retinue still remained outside the city.



Ryoma sighed. After waiting half the day, they were still waiting quietly outside the gates. He'd seen carriages pass ahead of them ten times since this morning. He didn't know who ordered this, but whoever it was, they must have hated him with a passion. He'd sent a runner ahead of time, informing the capital of his arrival date and the number of soldiers he would be bringing, and despite that, he was being treated...like this. This had to have been done out of ill will—not unlike power harassment in modern society.

I'd love to let them take a break, but...

The soldiers behind Ryoma were his chosen elites, and their gear was as excellent as their combat skills. At first glance, nothing about their appearance stood out, save the pitch-black color of their armor. But then again, there were other armies on the continent that wore uniform armor in unique colors, such as red or white. It wasn't unusual for noble houses to spend a small fortune on their uniforms, but in the end, it was nothing more than an ostentatious show of vanity.

But if one were to examine Ryoma's soldiers more closely, they'd be taken aback. They wore quality elven armor, supplied by Nelcius and reinforced with endowed thaumaturgy—comparable in monetary value to armor made of pure gold. But cost and value aside, their equipment was very effective, up to the same standards as bespoke armor that artisans made for nobles.

With everything combined, the gear of Ryoma's soldiers was ten times more valuable than another country's soldier's gear. These armaments weren't the kind of protection one could buy with just money either.

Products made by professional craftsmen were certainly of a higher quality than ones produced by machine. Even in modern society, where mass production was the standard, there were still fields that required a craftsman's expertise. But the fact remained that handcrafted work had a slower production rate than machine-produced items.

Conversely, that was what set Ryoma's forces apart. Most nobles could manage one or two sets of high-quality equipment, and high-ranking nobles could gather a few dozen. But hundreds? Few countries could manage that. Even the O'ttormean Empire would need years to gather three hundred sets. It explained Signus and Robert's shock at how Ryoma's army was equipped during Ryoma's war with Count Salzberg.

Maintaining such a high standard of equipment was a Herculean task, and the grim reality was that the more economical option was to treat one's soldiers as expendable rather than go to so much trouble to

equip them. Furthermore, this time, Ryoma's soldiers were even better equipped than they were during the war with Count Salzberg. Ryoma had spent a great deal of money to gather their gear, which just went to show how much his soldiers meant to him. And since he cared for them that much, he didn't want to needlessly burden them.

I did have temperature control added, alongside hardening and weight reduction.

The soldiers might have looked like they were burdened by the weight of all their equipment, but that wasn't actually the case. The armor was made from the hides and fangs of monsters living in Wortenia, and while some of the armor incorporated steel or other metals, they were still much lighter than traditional plate armor.

On top of that, their equipment was endowed with several types of thaumaturgical enchantments, chief among them hardening, weight reduction, and temperature control. Hardening increased the armor's durability, which was important in combat. In addition, weight reduction and temperature control might have seemed like trivial enchantments, but they were actually wonderful additions that were extremely flexible in their usefulness.

Weight reduction, as its name implied, manipulated the weight of one's armor. When activated to its full extent, armor felt like nothing more than a slightly heavy bag. Needless to say, fighting while shouldering dozens of kilograms of weight versus a mere several kilograms made a world of difference and helped preserve stamina.

Likewise, temperature control also helped with stamina, making it a crucial feature for armor. By activating the thaumaturgical seal, it reduced the temperature of the air around one's body. Simply put, it was akin to walking around with a portable air conditioner.

This world's climate was relatively warm, but it did snow on occasion, and natural disasters like ruthless typhoons weren't unheard of. But disregarding such threats, a full suit of armor, be it plate or otherwise, was taxing on soldiers. Just moving around required an extraordinary degree of strength, and fighting when fatigued and overencumbered was out of the question. Trying to force soldiers to fight like that would inevitably end in death.

Of course, no one could predict when battle might break out, so to compensate for that, soldiers had their armor equipped with endowed thaumaturgy. True, most nobles didn't care that much for their soldiers' well-being. To them, soldiers were mere tools, and the prospect of giving expensive gear to expendable men was laughable.

Ryoma, however, thought differently. He wasn't going to deny that soldiers were, in a way, expendable, but he believed that justified the cost to maintain and keep his soldiers in perfect shape. His way of thinking starkly contrasted with that of a noble in this world.

I guess we'll see soon enough who's right, but either way, I think we're almost at our limit here.

Most of his men were infantry who traveled by foot all the way here from the Wortenia Peninsula. Even with thaumaturgy lightening their equipment, his soldiers' stamina was still bound to run out eventually. They took breaks, where they were supplied with water and sweets, and when they stopped for camp, Ryoma thoughtfully planned their meals and ensured their sleeping accommodations were as convenient as possible. Nonetheless, given the distance between Epirus and the capital, the soldiers' stamina was dropping. Having to stand here for no apparent purpose must have been mentally taxing as well.

Honestly, I'm not faring much better. My butt's starting to hurt here.

Ryoma occasionally experienced blunt pain in his lower back and buttocks. It'd been over two years since he'd been summoned to this world, and he was much more used to riding a horse now, but there was no comparing a horse's back to the comfort of a car's seat. After sitting on his horse for so long, Ryoma wanted nothing more than to get out of his travel clothes already.

But honestly, there's nothing else we can do.

Blaming the sentinels guarding the gates wouldn't get them anywhere. They were just doing their job. If Ryoma was the kind of noble common in this world, he could've used his social station to have his way. Nobles were a privileged class, after all. In that regard, Ryoma's title of baron meant he could demand different treatment, and if his noble title wasn't enough, his glory as a national hero was, so he could've forced things to go the way he wanted.

If he really wanted to, Ryoma could have made his demands known, but it would come with a cost. His social status could force these people to do as he pleased, but their displeasure would build up like sludge in the back of their minds. Besides, hiding behind social status to bend things to his liking didn't sit well with Ryoma in the first place. He found it shameful. What others might think didn't bother him as much as his own views. Perhaps it was the concept of shame that seemed to hold most Japanese people in its shackles.

Besides, I'm a mercenary who came from nowhere and rose to power. Being condescending to the soldiers here wouldn't be wise.

Most of the nobles in Rhoadseria regarded him with hostility already, so earning the soldiers' ire as well would be unwise. They were mostly commoners, so it would tarnish his reputation among the lower classes too. Ryoma had no choice but to wait as time went by.

Another thirty minutes passed. A lone soldier jogged over, gasping for air. Superiors in the royal castle had likely ordered him to come here. Based on his expression, it seemed Ryoma's group would finally

get permission to enter the capital.

The soldier hurried over to the company commander standing by the gate and whispered in his ear. The commander nodded, then approached Ryoma and his entourage.

“My apologies for the wait, Baron Mikoshiba,” he said, his expression stiff and his voice strained from suppressed emotion. “The castle just sent word that you have permission to enter the city. Please, pass right through.”

Despite the commander’s attempt to mask his emotions, he couldn’t hide the way he shivered in terror. Anyone in his position would want to run away. He’d only done so because his job required him to, but he’d still left a national hero who also held the largest armed faction in the country out to dry for hours. And with Rhoadseria’s strict class system, he certainly expected consequences. Not just him, but his entire family could be on the chopping block.

The poor sap. He’s just doing his job, Ryoma thought to himself, feeling a twinge of mercy for the cowering guard commander. *He’s old enough to be my father, yet he’s groveling like this.*



The commander was a middle-aged man with an impressive mustache. He was well-built, with a decent physique, though he did have a small gut jutting out. And he, a grown man, was cowering before a boy young enough to be his son. It made Ryoma sick to his stomach.

Ryoma had no desire to exact any kind of retribution on this poor man. All he felt was pity for this sentinel who'd pulled the short straw. If someone had a stone thrown at them, they'd have to be a madman to lash out at the stone instead of the person who threw it. Sadly, even Ryoma's sensible way of thinking seemed to be a foreign idea in this world.

"Really? Thank you," Ryoma said.

The commander went very pale. Ryoma hadn't intended to blame him, but his unassuming tone struck the commander, who knew what Ryoma had been put through, as terrifying.

"H-Hm," the commander mumbled, like he was torn over whether he should say anything more, but Ryoma shook his head.

"Don't worry about it. You were just doing your job," Ryoma said as he spurred his horse forward. As he did, he took out a leather pouch full of gold coins from his pocket and threw it at the middle-aged commander's chest.



That day, a heavy, oppressive air permeated the queen's office. The reason went without saying; the party sent to deliver the subpoena to the Mikoshiba barony had returned.

It was just past seven in the evening. The curtain of night hung somberly over the city of Pireas.

"I see," Queen Lupis said. "He answered our summons quite readily, didn't he? I thought he'd be more difficult than this."

After completing her daily duties, Queen Lupis was sitting in her office and reading through the documents Meltina handed her. She heaved a deep sigh, then looked up at Meltina, who stood before her desk, with eyes glazed by confusion.

Seeing this filled Meltina with guilt. She felt like she'd made her beloved sovereign worry needlessly. However, when it came to Ryoma Mikoshiba, not even Meltina, Queen Lupis's most trusted retainer, could afford to act on her own. The House of Lords had completed its groundwork, and preparations were in place to dispose of Ryoma. But even so, she couldn't neglect to report this to Queen Lupis.

"Yes," Meltina replied. "We did expect him to eventually answer the subpoena, but not this quickly. Apparently, he made some bold statements to the messenger about proving his innocence before you."

Judging by his words, he almost looks admirable, but...”

Queen Lupis nodded gravely. Not much time had passed since Ryoma Mikoshiha took over northern Rhoadseria. Usually, newly gained territory was extremely difficult to rule during the first few months. Typically, one would focus on consolidating their rule—assuming they intended to rule over it. Perhaps a ruler only wanted to squeeze all the riches they could from the land, or they were simply too much of a fool and didn’t understand what ruling territory truly meant.

Nevertheless, despite such a trying period, Ryoma answered Queen Lupis’s summons with indifferent ease. Normally, this wouldn’t be unusual. A letter issued by the House of Lords carried much authority and influence, enough so that at times it even matched the monarch’s edict. Moreover, the pretense for his summons was that he was to testify as a witness, which was much different from being called as a defendant.

That in mind, it wasn’t that strange that Ryoma had reacted to the House of Lords’ subpoena in a timely manner. But Neither Queen Lupis nor Meltina were naive enough to assume that everything was going well. Ryoma had given them too much grief already for them to be optimistic when it came to him.

“What do you think he’s planning?” Queen Lupis asked.

Meltina frowned. Her beloved queen had asked her a question, and had this been a year or two ago, Meltina would have answered immediately, no matter how forced it might be. But right now, Meltina couldn’t rouse herself to do so. She knew that pretending to know the answer to something she didn’t have the first clue about could be as disastrous as feigning ignorance.

“Truth be told, I haven’t the foggiest. It’s possible he took the subpoena at face value and arrived to serve as a witness. Based on the sentinels’ reports, he was stalled a long time at the city gates. It was probably under the orders of some noble or another who bears a grudge against him. The problem is...”

“Mikoshiha himself didn’t say anything about the matter?”

“Nothing. He did receive a summons from the House of Lords, and the letter didn’t mention any charges against him, but unless he’s a fool, he must realize the position he’s in. And since he does, he also knows that going after whoever ordered for such harassment would look incriminating.”

Any person, no matter how kindhearted and trusting they were, would realize that they were being harassed after being stalled at the gates for half a day. Based on what the sentinels said, other nobles had arrived after him and entered after a brief delay, and even then, Ryoma didn’t complain. This alone was very suspicious. If nothing

else, Meltina didn't think Ryoma was the kind of man who would stand for that kind of treatment.

"You seriously think Mikoshiba would make such a naive decision?" Queen Lupis asked with a sardonic smile.

Meltina sighed and shook her head. She realized how absurd her words were. "No, I think the chances of that are slim. And what's more..." Meltina spread a map she'd prepared ahead of time over the table.

When the civil war ended, they gave Ryoma the title of baron and the Wortenia Peninsula to keep him occupied until the day he died. With Rhoadseria's strict class system, elevating a no-name mercenary who wasn't even a citizen of the kingdom to a noble rank was impossible, but as a rule, Queen Lupis hesitated to reward him as promised and then drive him out of the country. Breaking their agreement would have called Queen Lupis's credibility into question. It would be tantamount to her discarding one of the few virtues she had to her name. But considering the skill and decisiveness Ryoma displayed during the civil war, the choice was unavoidable.

In the name of protecting her kingdom's safety, Queen Lupis couldn't let Ryoma's talents and wisdom go to another country. Conversely, elevating a commoner to a significant noble position would make the other nobles turn against her. Given how weak her regime's foundation was at the time, Queen Lupis couldn't have carried such a weight. Helena seemed to be ignoring her subordinates' calls to dispose of Ryoma, even while Lupis herself was receiving similar advice. The nobles' aversion to this upstart foreigner was that intense.

On the other hand, Queen Lupis didn't trust Ryoma. An old proverb said that when the enemy was defeated, the victorious soldiers were to be slain. That was no exaggeration. In all parts of the world, nothing threatened a powerful ruler more than their own capable vassals. But Lupis didn't want to kill Ryoma, or perhaps she was too scared of the unfathomable eeriness Ryoma gave off to do so. Maybe it was both. Either way, the outcome was that the Mikoshiba barony's domain had expanded to include all of northern Rhoadseria.

Queen Lupis knew Ryoma was smart, but seeing him mature so much over such a short period of time was still a surprise.

Queen Lupis sighed in despair. "Still, looking at the map is appalling. We can't let him claim the north for himself."

"Quite right," Meltina agreed, nodding. "Negotiations might have been possible if the dispute had ended with the heads of all ten houses of the north placing themselves under his command, but the way things are now, it would be difficult. Our spies say Ryoma disposed of most of the heads of the ten houses during the war, demanding most

of them die as part of his postwar arrangements. I assume he set it up to make it seem like each of the heads chose suicide to preserve their family honor, but..."

There was no need to say anything else.

"Yes, that sounds like something he'd do," Queen Lupis replied.

Meltina nodded bitterly. "Deciding the fate of the defeated is the victor's privilege, but what he's done gives us a glimpse of his intentions."

The biggest issue brought up by Ryoma's war wasn't the war itself. Nobles starting wars on their own accord was a major issue, yes, but within the scope of Rhoadseria's legal system, it wouldn't cause that big of a problem. There were plenty of reasons a war could break out between two nobles—anything from the ownership of a village's well, disputes over borders, and criminals who escaped from one noble's county to another's. A territorial dispute could break out over something as trivial as ownership of a small forest used for collecting lumber. It wasn't uncommon for nobles to clash, and the reason could be as major or minor as one could imagine.

Normally, clashes like that would be punishable by Rhoadserian law, but with this world's limited communication and poorly maintained roads, the kingdom didn't have the time or resources to address each and every conflict that broke out. The law's foundation was too brittle, not just in Rhoadseria, but in every country in this world. Therefore, wars between governors were merely problems between the participants, so long as they didn't reach a certain scale. Officially, the House of Lords investigated such cases and the monarch arbitrated the dispute, but there was a tacit understanding that the victor took precedence in such judgments.

Until now, such conflicts were essentially overlooked, but the current situation was different.

The loss of the family heads is an issue, but the matter of their succession is an even bigger problem.

The bloodlines of some noble houses of the north were under threat of being completely terminated. As mentioned, wars between nobles weren't unheard of, but they were rarely this gruesome. The aristocracy's bloodlines were deeply mixed together due to marriages between different houses, meaning that many of the noble houses were distantly related.

That wasn't to say that wiping out a noble house was unprecedented, but one could count on two hands the number of times it had happened on such a large scale in all of Rhoadseria's history. What made it worse was that an upstart noble who was already abhorred by many had done it. It only made sense nobles with blood ties to the ten houses of the north would be outraged by it.

“The nobles’ feelings aside, when we consider national defense, we can’t leave Mikoshiba in control of the north,” Queen Lupis appended.

Meltina nodded gravely. The situation was a legal gray zone. Ryoma did violate the law, but how severely should they judge him for it? Typically, they’d take away some of his domain, but merely “some” would still be the same as tacitly permitting Ryoma to control most of the north.

Northern Rhoadseria was a vast strip of land that made up a fifth of Rhoadseria’s total territory. If Ryoma were to add it to the Wortenia Peninsula, he would have a domain larger than the southern kingdom of Brittania and Tarja. His realm would be even larger than a duchy. With a domain that size, it was doubtful Ryoma would peacefully serve Rhoadseria.

“Just looking at the size of his territory, the Mikoshiba barony will have nearly a third of Rhoadseria,” Meltina explained. “A mere vassal of the royal family can’t be allowed to hold such a large fiefdom. It would make him an even bigger threat than Duke Gelhart was, when he still had Heraklion. Plus, when you add Ryoma’s character to the mix...”

Meltina trailed off again. Finishing her sentence would be disrespectful to Queen Lupis. However, Meltina’s attempt to be considerate was inconsequential to the queen now.

“Yes. It’s hard to tell when he’ll do it, but if I know him, and I do, sooner or later he will seek to declare his independence,” Queen Lupis said bitterly. Her expression was that of someone forced to acknowledge a truth they wished to ignore.

Queen Lupis’s displeasure was understandable; Ryoma was her vassal—on paper anyway—and a vassal seeking independence from their liege meant they believed they were serving an unfit ruler. Lupis Rhoadserians had no aptitude or skill as a ruler, a truth that even she herself was aware of, but having that fact thrust before her was still insulting and aggravating.

“Your Majesty...”

Meltina knew how much Queen Lupis sacrificed since the day she took Rhoadseria’s throne, and she could see that her liege’s heart was breaking, so she swore, from the bottom of heart, to serve her queen to her last breath.

Ryoma Mikoshiba. I won’t deny that you’re a hero blessed with martial talent. Defeating Count Salzberg was an impressive feat, and your skill as a statesman is astounding. The spies have told me that despite so little time, Epirus is already alive again with activity. And you even personally answered the House of Lords’ summons. You are probably the most politically skilled of all of Rhoadseria’s nobles.

Meltina didn't want to admit these facts, and a few years ago, she would have swiftly rejected them. But right now, Meltina knew better than to let her emotions get the better of her. Doing so would be a deathtrap. It'd driven her former colleague to ruin.

But I won't let things go your way. No matter what means I must stoop to...

A dark flame flickered in Meltina's eyes.

"We have but one recourse," Queen Lupis whispered, resting her elbows on the table and steepling her hands in front of her mouth.

Despite how faint the queen's whisper was, Meltina did hear it, and she knew perfectly well what recourse her queen meant. The House of Lords had already arranged for it to be done.

That was why we sent the spies from the Chronicle barony, knowing they'd be sacrificial pawns.

Meltina's answer was decided. "Very well, Your Majesty. I will see to it that things proceed as scheduled."

Remaining as cool and collected as possible, Meltina bowed her head to her liege. She knew that what her queen needed right now was the final push that would grant her the courage and decisiveness to take the next step.

With this, Meltina turned around and left the room, granting her ruler the time needed to mentally prepare. But as she left the office, Meltina's expression was full of anxiety and urgency. She couldn't let Queen Lupis know, but Meltina was upset that she couldn't tell what Ryoma's true goal was. She was simply prudent enough to hide this fact from her mistress's eyes. Saying anything that would spur Queen Lupis's anxiety further would do no good and make her err in her choices.

We are well prepared. Everything should end as long as we bring him to the hearing.

They'd made enough preparations, so Meltina would accept any shame or indignity if it would help their scheme succeed. She had long since discarded her knightly pride.

But maybe I should consult Sir Mikhail first...

She was wary of becoming overconfident. Her own bitter experiences taught her how easy it was to fall prey to your own pride.

There was only one person she could rely on at a time like this, so Meltina quickly strode through the palace's corridor to meet her comrade, who bemoaned the fate of this kingdom as much as she did.

It was late, and the clock had already struck midnight, but a light still burned in an estate in Pireas.

Having heard the details from Meltina, Mikhail Vanash heaved a deep, heavy sigh. "I see. So that's why you came to me so late at

night.”

“I apologize for the sudden visit, but—”

“Don’t let it bother you.” Mikhail held up a hand, cutting her off, but there was no unpleasantness or annoyance in his gesture. “The time of day doesn’t matter when it’s about loyalty to our country.” Still seated on the sofa, he rested his chin atop his interlocked hands.

Meltina awkwardly continued. “For the time being, I advised Her Majesty to give the plan the go-ahead. I just still have some doubts...”

Mikhail nodded gravely.

Her judgment is sound. We cannot make the queen any more anxious than she already is. But the fact that we can’t anticipate his movements is worrying.

Had this been a few years prior, Mikhail would’ve chided Meltina for withholding her misgivings from Queen Lupis. He’d once believed it was a retainer’s role to relay everything accurately to their lord, without any embellishments or omissions. But he’d experienced many hardships since the end of the civil war, and they’d changed him from that reckless man who had nothing but blind loyalty to the royal house.

“I think you gave Her Majesty the right advice. Based on what you told me the other day, that woman handled the House of Lords’ preparations. It was Marquis Halcyon’s daughter, wasn’t it? I believe her name was...Charlotte?”

Honestly speaking, Mikhail wasn’t that familiar with Charlotte Halcyon. Charlotte picked and managed Queen Lupis’s court ladies and, on a more personal level, was a friend to the queen. She helped organize tea parties and balls, but she mostly acted as an assistant the queen could consult about jewelry and attire.

Mikhail, on the other hand, dealt strictly with military affairs. There was a time he’d been in charge of guarding Queen Lupis, so he’d always been near her then, but now he mostly managed the knight orders and internal patrols. They were both nobles in service to the royal house, but their duties did not intersect, so Mikhail had to confirm he was referring to the right person.

Meltina’s eyes widened in surprise.

I didn’t think he knew her name.

Mikhail and Charlotte were by no means close, but they’d met a few times in the palace and were both acquainted with Queen Lupis, so they weren’t strangers either. Given Charlotte’s abilities and her father’s position as marquis, Mikhail would at least know her name and face.

If Mikhail was to be of help to Queen Lupis, it was within his duties to know who was close to the queen. The problem was that while interacting with others was the key to success in life, Mikhail

had rejected that reasoning during his time in the palace. In the past, he'd adhered to the chivalrous ideal of living in honorable poverty, and that had conflicted with the more Machiavellian methods of gaining success that others used. He'd even renounced those methods as vile. Now, however, he'd all but let go of his old obstinance.

"You know her?" Meltina asked.

"I've heard rumors of her in the palace. They say she's quite shrewd and Her Majesty trusts her considerably. She's successfully suppressed the nobles' unrest. Even with Marquis Halcyon backing her, it's impressive how much she's achieved at her age."

Meltina couldn't mask her surprise at how Mikhail had gained such accurate intelligence.

He really has changed. He had to. It's a welcome change, though.

Meltina had seen signs of it before, but it seemed the stubborn man she knew, the knight who clung to chivalrous ideals, was a thing of the past now. In his place stood a reliable comrade, a man who balanced both the good and the bad and did so with effort and resolve. If nothing else, she felt confident that she was right to come to him for advice.

"We must keep Lady Charlotte's position in mind too," Meltina added. "If we order her to stop the preparations at this point, the House of Lords might not cooperate with us a second time."

"Right, and we can't risk losing their cooperation right now. It would jeopardize Charlotte's position, after all the effort she went to for us. And if that happened, her father could react unfavorably."

The nobility prioritized honor and appearances, and no noble would forgo retribution if their honor was tarnished. If they didn't seek revenge for humiliation, they would be judged too weak to exact their rightful vengeance, and the weak were always oppressed. As the ruling class, the nobility couldn't escape this truth. Maintaining one's honor wasn't simply a psychological or emotional endeavor; if lost, it would greatly affect one's life.

"Yes," Meltina agreed. "All the effort Charlotte put into channeling the nobles' hostility toward Ryoma would go to waste. We can't change the plan now, but..."

"You can't read his intentions?" Mikhail asked, pinpointing her doubts.

"That's right. Ignoring the House of Lords' subpoena would be unwise, and it could cost him his family line."

"He's still aware of his place as a noble in our kingdom, then."

Both Meltina and Mikhail fell silent. Ryoma's response to the summons wasn't abnormal, at least on the surface. As a Rhoadserian noble, he was right to answer the subpoena.

But is that really why he did this?

Rhoadserian law dictated that a noble must answer a call from the House of Lords, and their current plan hinged on that. From that perspective, Ryoma's cooperation worked in their favor. The scenario they envisioned was coming to fruition.

But it doesn't make sense for him to blindly obey the House of Lords without taking precautions.

Consumed with that thought, Meltina abruptly asked, "Am I overthinking this?"

Mikhail shook his head. "No, I think your doubts are justified. There's no overthinking when the fate of the country hangs in the balance. And when it comes to him, there's no such thing as being overly cautious either."

"You feel the same way, then, Sir Mikhail?"

"Considering everything he's done so far, yes..."

Meltina sighed. "But even though we're suspicious of him, there's not much we can do."

Technically, Ryoma hadn't done anything wrong yet.

If only he'd beat the guards at the gate for their rudeness, Meltina thought coldly.

If he'd done so, public opinion would have convicted him of damaging the dignity of the nobility as a whole. It would also reflect positively on Queen Lupis; bringing an arrogant, upstart nobleman to justice was much preferable to condemning a national hero. Meltina had no idea who'd conspired to taunt Ryoma at the gate, but she found it unfortunate that Ryoma had restrained himself.

Mikhail looked at Meltina and, with some hesitation, said, "Actually, there's something that's been troubling me."

"Something besides what I've mentioned?" Meltina asked.

Mikhail nodded, then produced a map from a bookcase set along the room's wall.

"Meltina, did you know that House Salzberg has two estates in the capital?"

"In the capital?" Meltina echoed, taken aback.

Meltina's family, House Lecter, made it a point to be sincere and honest. Though they had long served as knights, they lived more modestly than most influential nobles, and since they'd served in the royal guard or the monarch's guard for generations, they didn't often visit their own domain. She'd been raised to be frugal, and the idea of having not just one but two estates in the capital seemed wasteful to her.

"Most nobles have two estates. One in their domain, and one in the capital, so they have somewhere to stay when they visit," Mikhail continued. "These second estates are within the quarter of Pireas full of noble mansions. I assume you're familiar with that?"

Meltina nodded. Rhoadserian nobles usually resided in their domains, where they handled their matters of government, but they were required to appear in the capital at times for various reasons. Disputes between nobles called for the House of Lords to mediate, and capable nobles were called to serve their kingdom as bureaucrats in the palace.

It wasn't unlike the daimyos in Japan's Edo period, who were forced to reside in the capital for a time every year. Such a system didn't exist in Rhoadseria, but the way the daimyos had to travel from their homes to Edo and stay in residences in the capital was similar to how Rhoadserian nobles came to Pireas and stayed in secondary estates.

"But some nobles have a third estate somewhere in the capital's outskirts," Mikhail explained. "They usually use it as a home for their mistresses or a space for evening parties when their main estate inside the capital can't accommodate them. There's other reasons too, but, well, why some nobles have such mansions is immaterial to our interests. The problem is..."

Mikhail trailed off, then leaned forward and whispered, "A certain connection I have has told me that there have been movements in Count Salzberg's estate on the city outskirts. The House of Lords summoned Lady Yulia Salzberg this time. Because Count Salzberg's succession isn't finalized and she's not officially recognized as the family head yet, it makes sense she'd occupy the secondary estate during her stay in the capital. There are also all sorts of rumors about her too, so I can understand why she'd choose the one on the outskirts. I believed it was natural the lady would stay there, but..."

"Was there anything suspicious about this?" Meltina asked.

Mikhail nodded and replied, "Up until now, the estate only had the bare minimum of staff required for its upkeep. But over the last two weeks, they hired twice that number of employees. On top of that, I've gotten reports that they bought new furniture and fixtures in bulk."

"So they got new employees and changed the furniture... I see. They wouldn't normally do that, and now with Count Salzberg dead, it's even more unusual."

These were clear indications that the estate was going to be used, but there weren't many reasons one would suddenly start updating a residence they'd neglected for years.

"What do you think they're doing?" Meltina asked, leveling a questioning gaze at Mikhail.

Mikhail shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't have any more information on that. The person who shared it with me didn't know that much either."

Meltina paused. Something about his words felt off.

The person who shared this information with him... Who is he talking about?

Meltina didn't know of any friends or retainers of Mikhail's who would be privy to that kind of information. Of course, he probably had acquaintances she didn't know, but she was still curious.

Mikhail carried on, ignoring her doubts. "I did have my subordinates look into it, though. It seems they're preparing for an evening party."

"An evening party? At a time like this?" Meltina asked, baffled.

Since it would be held at Count Salzberg's estate, Lady Yulia must be hosting it. She hadn't yet officially become head of the Salzberg family, but there were no other possible successors to the late count. One couldn't fault her for hosting a party there. Also, it was customary for provincial governors to hold an evening party and present themselves publicly. However, hosting a party now, with a summons from the House of Lords fast approaching, was exceedingly strange.

Not to mention, Lady Yulia just lost her husband. That means...

According to Rhoadserian customs, widowed women either spent a year in mourning, or they retired to a Church of Meneos nunnery. It was only an aristocratic custom and not punishable by law, but the aristocracy valued traditions and customs. Ignoring them would mark one as a heretic. Merely attending a royal event would be wildly inappropriate, to say nothing of hosting an event themselves.

Lady Yulia's actions weren't unnatural, per se, but they were certainly strange.

There is one thing that could explain all this...

Unfortunately, that one thing was the worst-case scenario.

Unable to ignore that possibility, Meltina asked, "You don't think he put her up to it, do you?"

Her words echoed loudly in the room, and in that instant, a bolt of lighting streaked outside the window, followed by rumbling thunder. When the thunder gave way to silence once more, Mikhail nodded slowly.

"Then Lady Yulia Salzberg... She...!" Meltina cried out, rising to her feet.

"There's no real proof," Mikhail noted, "but the only other survivors of the ten houses of the north are the Twin Blades, Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria, and a handful of other heirs. And honestly, I don't see Ryoma sparing the wife of the man who opposed him. But it all makes sense if Lady Yulia turned to his side."

"But he killed Thomas Salzberg. How could she join her husband's killer?" Normally, the very prospect would be unthinkable. Meltina couldn't fathom a widow doing that.

Mikhail sighed and shook his head. “Normally, it would be hard to believe, but surely you’ve heard rumors of Count Salzberg’s debauchery? And I hear that Lady Yulia is a strong-minded woman who married into his family despite coming from a line of merchants and single-handedly managed his household. I could imagine her choosing to cut out her husband when she realized the situation was worsening. She could also be pretending to join forces with Ryoma so she can find a chance to kill him for revenge. But if that was her reason, don’t you think she’d contact us?”

“Well, yes, I guess she would,” Meltina muttered. As much as she wanted to deny the possibility, she couldn’t refute it altogether.

Everything he just said is conjecture. None of it is fact.

But it all pointed to one conclusion.

“So you’re saying the evening party that’s to be held in the Salzberg estate...”

“I’m not sure how they’ll go about it,” Mikhail said gravely, “but it’s probably to show off the Mikoshiba barony’s power.”

Meltina’s expression contorted with bitterness. There was only one reason the Mikoshiba barony would make a show of its power.

Unlike Meltina, Mikhail remained calm and composed as he said, “But looking at it another way, this could be our chance.”

“What do you mean?” Meltina mumbled impatiently.

“Our country has no need of nobles who would actually answer Ryoma’s invitation. Don’t you agree?”

Meltina was momentarily speechless. “You can’t mean...?” she whispered.

Mikhail answered her with only a cold smile, hiding his efficient scheme in his heart.

That night, the light in the room burned on until the sun rose on the horizon.

Chapter 2: Of Kings and Overlords

Several days had passed since Ryoma Mikoshiba arrived in Pireas. Life in the capital hadn't changed much. People still freely walked the streets, laughing and smiling as ever. Peddlers entered the city gates, and countless wagons cruised along the roads. It was another ordinary moment in an otherwise unextraordinary day. Or so it seemed. Under the surface, the rumblings of great change were gradually growing louder, preparing to swallow the city.

That day, two people met in a large estate hidden in a thick forest on Pireas's outskirts. One of them was a young man, his face mature for his age. The other was a beautiful woman, her chestnut hair elegantly pulled back.

They sat on the sofas in the spacious office, facing each other. The atmosphere between them was relaxed, as if they owned the place. The teapot, cups, and cakes sitting on the table next to them hinted that they did.

The room was originally the study of the mansion's owner, but the relaxed way with which they occupied it seemed to imply that it was theirs. That wasn't to say they owned the estate, though, or that they were even related to its owner by blood.

According to Rhoadseria's register, the owner of this estate was Count Thomas Salzberg. The count, however, was no longer in this world; he'd died at the hands of Ryoma Mikoshiba. Since there was no formal succession of the family head yet, this mansion belonged to his legal wife, Yulia Salzberg.

The two people using the room were technically guests of the manor's owner, who was currently out. As guests, they were equals, yet there was an obvious difference in their positions—the hierarchical difference between a monarch and his retainer.

"How go the preparations?" Ryoma asked Simone Christof, who sat opposite of him. "The evening party's around the corner. If there are any problems, I'd rather you point them out sooner rather than later."

Simone nodded and reached for a stack of documents she'd prepared beforehand.

"Things are going more or less smoothly. Mr. Boltz has finished paving the road from the Wortenia Peninsula to Epirus, so delivering supplies should go smoothly. The same can't be said for the roads

south of Epirus, unfortunately. The deaths of the ten houses' heads has muddled things there, so deliveries could take longer than planned. The highways haven't been properly serviced in months. But we built our schedule accounting for some delays, so it should arrive on time for the dinner party."

A sigh escaped Ryoma's lips. Simone watched him anxiously. She was confident she'd done her job perfectly, but she also knew how important the upcoming party was for the Mikoshiba barony.



After staring into space for a few seconds, Ryoma eventually said, “I see... Well, it’s all within an acceptable margin of error. Still, a delay in supplies is pretty bad news. Although, given what’s to come, servicing the roads at this point would be a waste, and doing so could cause other complications for us. It’s a difficult question...”

Typically, each domain’s governor maintained the highways that crossed their lands. If new land was under development, the country would sometimes initiate the paving, but in most cases, the regional governors would coordinate operations with one another and then the country would approve their plan. This power over transportation infrastructure was indicative of the vast authority nobles held.

But great authority also came with many troubles. Managing a highway was a lot of work. The priority was periodically repairing and maintaining the barrier pillars that kept monsters at bay, as well as maintaining the flagstones that paved the road, but there were plenty of other issues—too numerous to count. Removing weeds was backbreaking work, and whenever a storm or a typhoon occurred, the mud and fallen trees would have to be cleared. However, since the governors in the north who handled this job were now gone, there was no one to manage and maintain the roads anymore.

I figured they’d just breed more problems if I kept them alive, but...

The ten houses had ruled over northern Rhoadseria since the country’s inception, but most of their bloodlines had been terminated during Ryoma’s war with Count Salzberg. Of the ten, only three remained: House Salzberg, with Lady Yulia as its provisional successor; House Galveria, which Signus had inherited; and House Bertrand, which Robert would go on to inherit. The ten had been reduced to fewer than a third of their number, and Queen Lupis hadn’t approved any of their inheritances yet either. This meant that, strictly speaking, even for those three exceptions, succession was still incomplete. In a way, all ten houses were currently in a state of limbo.

That was where Ryoma’s plan came in. He picked promising people from among the seven remaining houses and appointed them as temporary heads. Should their work prove reliable, they could restore their respective family lines.

Who knows how that will go, though.

In Ryoma’s opinion, most of the nobles in this world were terrible statesmen. It wasn’t because their taxation was severe, although he wouldn’t deny their greed altogether either. Nobles everywhere shared a disproportionate sense of hubris—meaningless pride. The way they clung to their rights while shirking their responsibilities didn’t sit well with Ryoma.

Nobles had duties, a statesman’s obligations and responsibilities.

Those duties could be described in a number of ways, but it all boiled down to a singular idea: the safety and prosperity of their vassals. In Ryoma's eyes, so long as they fulfilled this duty, they could take as many bribes or have as many mistresses as they wanted. But as far as he could see, most nobles didn't recognize this obligation. Of course, they would often say they did what they did for the country or the people. If one just listened to their slogans and justifications, one would think them admirable rulers. But those words were all empty gestures they never acted on.

In Ryoma's mind, the nobles were driven by greed and nothing else. After all, nobles typically spent most of their taxes on their own personal pleasures. Consequently, he saw no value in keeping them alive. Rhoadseria's nobles in particular were typically coldhearted and arrogant. Knowing them, even if Ryoma did spare them, they wouldn't thank him for it. In fact, they'd be outraged by the prospect of an upstart taking pity on them and swear revenge.

With all that in mind, Ryoma had handled the defeated nobles as he saw fit.

But maybe I got rid of too many of them?

His plans required that the heads of the ten houses be eliminated—that much was for certain—and he'd intentionally punished them severely in order to stir up the nobles' hatred. All the same, Ryoma wondered if putting it off would have been better. There was no point regretting it after the fact, though.

"So, we've prepared the ingredients for the meal. What about the chef, and the orchestra? Are those preparations complete too?" Ryoma asked.

Simone took a sheet of paper from the bundle of documents and extended it to Ryoma. "The orchestra's been arranged for. They requested a hefty payment, but they're a famous troupe that has performed at royal banquets before. As for the chef, I did find one, but..."

Ryoma scanned over the document she gave him. "I see. Kikuna Samejima..."

It was a Japanese name, the likes of which he hadn't heard in some time, aside from members of the Igasaki clan. The nostalgia it prompted would have flustered most people, but Ryoma had anticipated that this could happen, and he wasn't going to let homesickness overwhelm him now. All he felt was the realization that a possibility he'd predicted turned out to be true.

I can see why Simone's unsure about it.

Simone carried on, gauging Ryoma's reactions. "As you specified, I went to Epirus's guild with our request. After a month of waiting, she was the one who accepted our request. She had a recommendation

from the guild's manager attesting to her skill and upstanding personality."

"A recommendation, eh?" Ryoma replied with a cold smile.

Forming connections and human relationships was important in this world. Employment was akin to serving a master, and freedom of employment wasn't guaranteed like it was in the modern world. For example, one could be hired to work at a mercantile house, and assuming they weren't fired, they were expected to devote their life to their place of employment.

Be that as it may, it did have its advantages. An upfront mercantile house would not only pay a wage, but also provide lodgings and meals and mediate marriages for unmarried workers. Plus, if the master acknowledged the employee's work, the employee could even become an independent merchant later down the line. In that regard, the terms of employment were far from terrible.

If there was one problem, it was getting work in the first place. Hiring a complete nobody was a pretty considerable risk, since who was to say they were trustworthy. Anyone could learn to read and do basic calculations, but employers needed to know their employees wouldn't steal their wares or money. This applied not just to merchants, but nobles seeking to hire servants as well. They sought trustworthy employees who would work for them long-term. For this reason, many employers picked their workers from among their relatives and friends.

In other words, connections decided one's employment, but not everyone had those kinds of connections. In fact, people talented in human relations were hard to come by. That was where the guild came in. It handled people from all sorts of fields, not just adventurers and mercenaries. It was like a multinational corporation, and part of their business included functioning as human resource consultants mediating between employers and the unemployed. The guild guaranteed the prospective workers' abilities, so employers could hire them with peace of mind.

In that sense, it wasn't unusual that Ryoma had consulted the guild to hire a chef. Even if he had *entirely other motives* for doing so, it didn't come across as the slightest bit suspicious.

"And? Did you test her skills?" Ryoma asked. This chef would be charged with cooking for an important evening party, so even with the guild manager's recommendation, they needed to ensure her skills were reliable.

"Yes," Simone confirmed. "The recommendation stated that she worked as head chef for a certain company in Dreisen, the capital of Helnesgoula. I've tried her cooking, and I believe she fits your standards, my lord."

Ryoma nodded. The paper he held contained a record of Kikuna Samejima's history, or her resume, so to speak.

No picture, though...

But it did contain all the information Ryoma needed.

Age: 28 years old. Single. Height: 155 centimeters. Weight: 48 kilograms. Damn, they even have her three measurements.

Her age aside, the information on her body was edging toward sexual harassment. That concept didn't really exist in this world, but Ryoma was still disgusted to see such information written on a resume.

He flipped the document and read the other side, which was a record of her employment history.

So she was employed for five years at a company in Dreisen. And before that, she traveled the continent, polishing her cooking skills. She doesn't specialize in any particular kind of cooking, but she does prepare dishes from the central and southern continents in a western-continent style.

Nothing about her resume particularly stood out. Regardless of how Kikuna Samejima found her way here from Ryoma's Earth, her cooking skills probably began with preparing dishes from their home world. Even if she wasn't trying to hide it, she passed it off by saying they were dishes from the other continents.

Traveling the continent makes it easy for others to acknowledge the novelty and originality of her dishes...

Given her name, Ryoma had no doubt she came from his Earth. She could be of Japanese descent rather than being from Japan, but she certainly wasn't originally from this world.

Was it a coincidence that someone from my world was picked to serve under me, or was it someone's will at play?

To that end, Ryoma had to ask Simone, who'd actually met this woman, what her impression of Kikuna Samejima was. Simone, who was sly and experienced in negotiating, had a very observant eye. Her impression would be valuable.

"Hm, I see. This information looks to be about right. So what was your take on her?"

"I have no proof," Simone answered, "but it's probably as you've assumed, my lord." During their conversation, Kikuna Samejima hadn't done anything incriminating, yet Simone was convinced she was suspicious.

"So I was right." Ryoma folded his hands, looking up.

"What shall we do, then?" Simone asked. In her opinion, hiring a suspicious figure—even a chef she'd gone to great lengths to find—was a liability.

That would be the obvious decision, Ryoma thought.

Ryoma could see the concern in Simone's expression. Letting a suspicious person cook one's food would be terribly dangerous. Even Ryoma would be defeated if his food was poisoned or laced with narcotics, and that would ruin all his plans. Of course, there was no proof that Kikuna Samejima was an enemy of theirs, but the suspicion alone was a problem.

But the plan will fall apart if we don't use her.

Very few people could fulfill the demands Ryoma set in his job offer—no chef born in this world, at least.

And I don't have any proof the Organization is against me either...

Ryoma went to the guild to find a chef for two reasons. The first was that he needed their mediation services, but the other was that he suspected that the mysterious organization operating in the shadows of the continent was the guild itself.

His suspicion, as it turned out, was right on the mark.

Well, at this point, it's hard to tell if the guild is the Organization, or if the Organization's just leeching off a part of the guild, but...

Ryoma wasn't even sure if the Organization was his enemy.

Based on what King Julianus said, they're definitely warmongers.

If the Organization really did view Ryoma as an enemy, they would've had several chances to strike at him by now. The group spanned the continent, meaning they had the resources to eliminate Ryoma if they were so inclined. However, Ryoma was still alive and well, which implied the Organization didn't regard him as an enemy—at least not yet. Ryoma could only hypothesize, though; he lacked proof as to their presence and intentions.

This leaves just one conclusion...but that's fine. We need to focus on getting through the evening party first, anyway.

"Are you sure we're holding the evening party, my lord?" Simone questioned, sensing how Ryoma was feeling. He'd already explained their future plans to her, so she shouldn't have needed confirmation, but she felt she had to ask.

"Are you anxious about it?" Ryoma inquired.

Simone hesitantly nodded. "I understand why we're having the party, but with the House of Lords' interrogation upon us, I'm not sure how many nobles would even attend."

"You can't make a prediction?"

"No...ashamed though I am to admit it."

Simone was a skilled merchant with a keen eye for business, and she understood that sometimes one had to risk danger to claim the fruit of profit. But that didn't mean she liked gambling. Simone knew that Ryoma had made all sorts of preparations for the evening party, but it was hard to tell just how useful his preparations would be. There was no telling how things would turn out until the deed was

done. Unfortunately, losing this gamble would put the Mikoshiba barony in a precarious position. Plus, Kikuna Samejima was added to the equation as an unknown variable. Simone's anxiety was understandable.

Ryoma, on the other hand, was the picture of composure.

"You're absolutely right, Simone. This is a gamble. Still, we have a chance of winning, and I've been doing everything I can to ensure we do. And if we need to take care of Samejima, we have the cooking utensils we asked Nelcius for, right?"

Hiring Samejima was another gamble. They didn't know her intentions, and they had no idea what the Organization was trying to achieve by sending her. Nonetheless, Ryoma could ask Laura and Sara to watch over her, and should Samejima poison the food, the utensils Dilphina was delivering would solve that issue. Ryoma had them made especially for situations like this.

The only other unknown was whether people would attend the evening party, and Ryoma had measures in place to ensure even that.

"Of course, even with everything I've done, there's a chance people won't act the way I need them to," he said. "But anyone who's not smart enough to pick up on what this party is for isn't worth siding with anyway. In other words, if they can't discern that much, they won't be a threat even if they turn against us."

He sounded convinced, and since he was her lord, Simone had no choice but to prepare herself for what was to come. She did, after all, decide to be his retainer.

I can understand what he's trying to do. Besides, now's definitely the time to act.

It was clear to all that Rhoadseria had no future. It might have been possible to prolong its life by another decade or so, but it was already terminal and lying on its deathbed. All that was left was to either while away the time until its demise or have someone put it out of its misery. Either way, the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would fall to ruin. The question was what were the people to do next. They could follow the country to its doom, or they could carve out a new way for themselves.

Sensing Simone's resolve, Ryoma smiled. He then rose from his sofa, walked to his desk by the window, opened a drawer, and took out an envelope.

"You don't need to worry about it so much. I've got a few cards up my sleeve."

Ryoma handed the envelope to Simone. She quickly inspected its wax seal and, after a moment, cocked her head curiously.

Where have I seen this seal before...? She'd seen the design at some point, but she couldn't remember which house it belonged to. *This is*

likely some noble house, and probably a high-ranking one at that.

As a merchant, Simone had dealt with nobles in the past, so she was familiar with many different emblems. But that wasn't to say she'd memorized each and every one. There were hundreds of such families just within Rhoadseria, and if the neighboring countries were included, that number jumped into the thousands. No person could accurately memorize every single emblem. The fact that Simone couldn't attach a name to the design just meant that the Christof Company didn't deal with that house directly.

But it's definitely familiar.

It had to belong to a major noble or an influential trade firm.

After staring at the emblem for a few seconds, trying to remember, Simone concluded that she couldn't recollect the name. Giving up, she turned to Ryoma.

"What is this?"

Ryoma gave her a teasing smile, looking like a boy satisfied with his successful prank.

"Open it and read what's inside," he told her.

Simone did as he said. She took out the letter and swiftly read its contents. Once she finished, she realized why her lord was so composed.

"So that's why... I see," Simone whispered as she once again confirmed the name of the letter's sender. No matter how many times she checked, the name remained the same.

I didn't think he would turn to the lord's side.

The name was truly unexpected, but that was precisely why Ryoma was so confident.

"Not just Helena, but even those two have accepted what's to come," Ryoma explained.

"Meaning?" Simone asked.

"Well, they sent me a letter thanking me for my help with the spy. And they'll come to visit me in the middle of the night, at that."

Simone was speechless. She'd already heard of Helena Steiner's involvement, but this was the first time she was hearing of those two. They promised to pay him a nightly visit because they wanted to avoid detection, which could only mean one thing.

I know the lord's intentions, but I didn't think his preparations ran so deep.

Simone was simply baffled. If the contents of this letter were true, this country's future was all but decided.

"My apologies for being so forward and forgetting my place. Please forgive me, my lord," Simone said as she bowed her head deeply.

That night, when the clock ticked past midnight—a time when everyone else would be fast asleep—Ryoma welcomed a guest.

“First, allow me to thank you, Baron Mikoshiba, for saving my brother-in-law’s...for saving Elnan’s life. Normally, he’d be here with me to thank you personally, but he’s busy ensuring matters are moving along.”

Count Bergstone trailed off for a moment and ruminated on his next words. Seeing the conflict on the middle-aged man’s face, Ryoma had a faint idea of what he was about to say, but he waited for the count to speak. They both gazed into each other’s eyes. After several seconds of silence, Count Bergstone finally made up his mind and continued.

“I hope you forgive him this time. My brother-in-law will arrive in the coming days to give his regards as well, my lord.”

Count Bergstone rose from the sofa and bowed deeply. It was a significant gesture; a count was bowing his head to a baron even though he ranked higher than the baron in the noble hierarchy.

The fact was that Ryoma’s men had saved Count Zeleph from assassination. From Ryoma’s perspective as a Japanese person, showing the utmost respect to the savior of one’s life was to be expected, but this world functioned within a strict class system. Had Count Bergstone bowed to Ryoma in the middle of the Rhoadserian court, it would have caused quite the riot. And to top it all off, Count Bergstone had called Ryoma his lord, making it clear he was acting as a vassal. He did all of these things in secret because he knew how the world would react.

Ryoma was surprised by Count Bergstone’s actions, but he soon smiled. “I appreciate the gesture, but we’re comrades striving for a common goal. You don’t have to stand on ceremony like that.”

To Ryoma, the two counts weren’t much more than useful pawns. If Count Zeleph proved himself to be incompetent, Ryoma wouldn’t care one bit for his life. Saying it to their faces, though, would be the height of folly. And since Count Bergstone chose to treat him with modesty, he thought it best to meet the gesture magnanimously.

Ryoma’s complacency came from a position of power. After all, House Bergstone did declare its fealty to him, even if unofficially, and that would radically change the cooperative relationship they’d built so far.

I figured he’d grumble more, given his personality. I didn’t think he’d make up his mind this quickly.

The intention behind Count Bergstone’s visit was evident, but seeing him approach so humbly was a pleasant surprise. They were

about to challenge the entire Kingdom of Rhoadseria to war, as it were, and holding negotiations when one side was emotionally cornered wasn't a good idea. Ryoma wanted to ask Count Bergstone for his loyalty and was planning to explain his future plans to some extent, but the count ended up saving him the trouble of doing that.

Well, I guess he feels backed against a wall already.

Anyone with even a rudimentary sense for politics would see just how fatal Rhoadseria's current position was. Nevertheless, understanding that situation and being able to resolve it were two different things. It was all the worse for Count Bergstone, who had no final say in the management of this country. Still, he was a skilled politician, and he wasn't going to sit by and do nothing as things went downhill. He'd tried to advise Queen Lupis, who did have the final say in the country's management.

Not that much came of it, from the looks of things.

That was why Count Bergstone came to Ryoma's doorstep that night.

Unfortunately, Queen Lupis wasn't fit to be queen. She was a merciful woman, giving one the initial impression that she might be a fine ruler, and her close aides, Meltina Lecter and Mikhail Vanash, were entirely devoted to her because they believed in her as a sovereign. Ryoma had no qualms with her merciful nature, but it was a different story when it came to her capacity as a ruler. Mercy was only one virtue of a fine king, and if his flaws were enough to cancel out that virtue, then it was meaningless. Simply put, Queen Lupis lacked a certain quality, a natural disposition. She was too indecisive to make her own decisions and move things along.

It's sad, really.

Ryoma knew no one was perfect—he himself was as flawed as she was—and normally, Lupis's shortcomings wouldn't have been so critically fatal. Indecisiveness was hardly a rare trait. But only the mundane and insignificant could waver in the face of important choices.

Sadly, Queen Lupis isn't mundane or insignificant. It's very unfortunate...for the people of this kingdom, that is.

How many times had that thought crossed Ryoma's mind? That was honestly and truly how he felt. He was still angry with her for effectively exiling him to the Wortenia Peninsula, but at the same time, he couldn't deny feeling some pity for her current state.

A sovereign's role was to make decisions, but Queen Lupis wasn't a decisive person. The outcome of that went without saying, and her merciful nature just became quicksand.

It was worse when more than one person offered her their opinion. Being compassionate meant being emotional, tenderhearted

even. So what happened when an indecisive ruler became sentimental? In most cases, they would prioritize the person who offered the option over the option's validity. Indeed, Queen Lupis had a proclivity for getting carried away by emotion and therefore couldn't make decisions that would hurt her or those close to her.

Mikhail Vanash's fate was a prime example of that. Mikhail was a close aide to Queen Lupis, as trusted as Meltina, but even though he was a loyal vassal who served her for many years, he still acted on his own accord during the last civil war and got himself captured by Duke Gelhart. To save Mikhail after making such a shameful blunder, Queen Lupis spared the leader of the opposing faction, accepting his offer of allegiance.

Being merciful isn't a flaw in and of itself, but everything has its limits.

A country run by an overemotional ruler was bound to fly into chaos, and Queen Lupis's mercy had only poisoned Mikhail in a sense. It was difficult to criticize a king for acting too much in their own self-interest, but no one would hesitate with those favored by the sovereign. Mikhail's life had been spared, but not only was his honor as a knight tarnished, he was also ordered to remain under house arrest. The people around Mikhail all mocked and insulted him. Things had died down somewhat by now, but when the matter was still fresh in the nobles' memories, public criticism of Mikhail ran rampant across the court.

And all of that came about by Lupis's indecisiveness.

Had Queen Lupis accepted that she was nothing but a figurehead, Rhoadseria might've grasped a different future for itself. Ryoma could have shown her the path to that future too. But reality was unforgiving; Ryoma's kind intentions were utterly betrayed, and that possibility fizzled out of existence.

Many of the nobles doubted Lupis's abilities as a ruler and were beginning to once again gather under Viscount Gelhart, who sponsored Radine Rhoadserians, her paternal half sister. The country was in a volatile state of unrest and political instability. Fearing that, each noble hurried to strengthen their domain's military and ordered excessive taxation on their subjects.

Among the ruling class, that was a typical response to anxiety, but none of that mattered to the people being extorted. The common man sought only one thing: a stable livelihood. So long as they had that, they cared very little about who ruled over them. However, now that their stability was fading, the commoners were clashing with their governors. Just the other day, the monarch's guard dispatched a battalion of knights to suppress a rebellion in the country's south, where a group of villages had risen up in revolt. Things were still peaceful around the capital itself, thankfully, but even that would

crumble given time.

The capital's streets were much emptier than they were when I visited last year.

With internal affairs destabilizing, economic activity had been declining too. The country was effectively dying.

I'm the one who drove it to that state, though.

More accurately, someone was trying to throw Rhoadseria into a state of chaos, and Ryoma played along with their machinations. Ryoma wasn't the principal offender in this case, but he was certainly an accomplice. Still, there was no communication between the offender and the accomplice, to say nothing of cooperation.

Right about now, the offender probably saw that the situation had progressed faster than expected and suspected someone was involved. If Ryoma was right in his assumption of who was behind this, then they'd already figured out Ryoma was their unseen collaborator.

Either way, the trial in the House of Lords is going to be the key to everything.

Excitement ran through Ryoma like a jolt of electricity.

Count Bergstone must have noticed, because he said, "First, we must deal with the upcoming evening party. Ever since I heard of the event, I've kept my eyes peeled on them." He didn't need to elaborate on who he was referring to.

"Good work. I wouldn't have expected any less from you," Ryoma replied, looking at the count. "You could see what I was planning without me needing to explain anything."

"I could only guess at your intentions, my lord," Count Bergstone said vaguely.

"So, what's your take on what they're doing?"

"I believe they're going to try to crush your dignity, my lord."

Ryoma's lips spread into a thin smile. "Just like they did way back with Count Salzberg...right?"

Ryoma referred to the callous trap that had turned a once noble hero into a bitter, terrible tyrant.

"Yes, that is the most likely possibility. I believe they will attempt it during the ball to be held following the evening party."

"I see... So you think so too."

Ryoma nodded. Count Bergstone's prediction matched Laura's misgivings.

I was right to have them give me lessons.

Ryoma hadn't actually wanted to take those lessons. He realized that they imparted necessary skills for a noble, but at the same time, he felt like it wasn't necessary to study that right now. Nevertheless, Laura and Sara had insisted on it, saying it could end up being essential, and Ryoma had reluctantly gone along with their idea. In

truth, he'd felt like the twins might be worrying too much, but it seemed their misgivings were justified.

Things are flowing my way.

It felt like a revelation. A shock ran down Ryoma's spine, like the tingling of electricity. He'd never gotten to experience this kind of pleasant excitement in modern Japan.

I guess, in some ways, being called to this world wasn't all bad.

Ryoma poured wine into the glass he set for Count Bergstone and celebrated a new, skilled vassal's oath of fealty.



After concluding his secret meeting with Ryoma Mikoshiba that night, Count Bergstone sneaked through the streets of Pireas, evading any prying eyes, and entered his estate in the noble sector through the back gate.

It was already past four in the morning. In another hour, the eastern sky would begin to brighten. The capital's gates were closed until dawn, but that was something money and authority could overcome.

However, for Count Bergstone, who was among Rhoadseria's more reasonable nobles, this feat struck him as very inappropriate. Normally, he would wait outside the gates until dawn or ask to spend the night at Count Zeleph's estate, but tonight he needed to return to his mansion as quickly as possible.

"Thank you for your service," Count Bergstone told the coachman who'd served him for many years, depositing a small leather purse full of hush money in his hands. "Needless to say, tell no one what I did tonight."

Of the several coachmen working under Count Bergstone's employ, this particular one was from a family of vassals who'd served House Bergstone since his grandfather's generation. He wasn't a knight, but he was highly skilled and could use martial thaumaturgy, making him both a coachman and a bodyguard. He was the perfect person for secret missions like this one.

The coachman's family house was adjacent to the mansion's stable. As long as he didn't make any major blunders, in just a few years, his child would enter House Bergstone's service as an apprentice. In that regard, he was more reliable than a coachman for hire. After all, his family was basically being held hostage, as awful as that sounded. But Count Bergstone wouldn't treat a long-standing retainer like him poorly. A noble valued nothing more than reliable retainers.

Nobles were certainly haughty, cruel, and coldhearted, but that was just one side of how they acted. They weren't foolish enough to

believe that they could maintain all the power they gained entirely on their own. Anyone who thought that they didn't need others' help wouldn't be able to keep their house alive. Illness or accident was bound to come sooner or later, and then they would pay the price for their foolishness. Just like a debt, the time to pay would eventually come, be it to the nobles themselves, or their families...

"Now return home and rest well. Use that money to buy something nice for your children."

"I'm in your debt, my lord." The coachman weighed the sack in his hands before bowing his head. "I'll be off then." Without another word, he returned to the driver's seat and silently spurred the horse along.

Night's curtain still hung in the sky, but what was known as the dead of night—the time between two and half past two—was over an hour ago. It wasn't late night, but it wasn't quite morning yet either. Perhaps in modern Japan, red-light districts would still operate in these late hours, but most people would be drifting in their dreams. That applied to Count Bergstone's family, as well.

The mansion was dark, not a candle left burning. The servants didn't imagine their master would return at an hour like this, so no one was there to greet him. The sole exceptions were the guard who opened the back gate and the guards patrolling his garden.

Count Bergstone walked through the dark estate, holding up a lantern with his right hand. He knew his way through his own house well enough. He entered the building through the kitchen's back door, then walked to the entrance hall and up the stairs to the second floor.

Even with the faint light of the lantern to illuminate the dim mansion, his steps were quick. But as he reached for his office's doorknob, he paused, sensing someone's presence inside.

Is someone there?

He listened carefully. Hearing the sound of paper rustling, he reached for the sword at his waist and quickly analyzed the situation.

An assassin? No, an assassin wouldn't be this careless.

Swordsmanship was an aristocratic pursuit, so nobles practiced it to some extent. Count Bergstone was by no means a warrior, and even he could feel the presence in his room through the door. If the person inside was an assassin, they were a second- if not third-rate one.

Furthermore, this was Count Bergstone's capital estate, and even compared to the mansion in his home domain, it was guarded quite well. There were dozens of guards patrolling the premises. Count Bergstone had passed without issue since he was the master of the household, but any intruder would have been expelled.

To top it off, there had been too many suspicious incidents as of late, such as the assassination attempt on his brother-in-law Count

Elnan Zeleph's life, as well as the revelation that the secret messenger Count Bergstone sent to Ryoma had been some sort of spy. With so many incidents happening recently, the guards were all the more vigilant and alert, so the possibility of this being an assassin was close to nil.

Then who is it?

Since Count Bergstone handled confidential information, very few people could enter his office. His wife and the maids charged with the mansion's upkeep could enter, but they typically didn't. Plus, there was no reason for them to visit Count Bergstone in his office at this late hour.

Which means...

Having come to a conclusion, Count Bergstone turned the doorknob and quickly looked around the room.

"Elnan... It's you."

Count Bergstone sighed in relief, glad to see a markedly different scene from what he'd been fearing. Nonetheless, while he trusted his brother-in-law, Count Bergstone couldn't condone Count Zeleph's sniffing around in his office in the dead of night. The fact that Count Bergstone didn't immediately fly into a rage over this violation of privacy was proof he was still being rational.

Count Zeleph, on the other hand, acted like there wasn't anything suspicious at all about what he was doing. He even greeted Count Bergstone with a smile.

"Working so late at night? Impressive, brother-in-law. Was it cold out?" Count Zeleph remarked. He walked over to a shelf like he owned the place and took out a bottle of brandy, holding it up for Count Bergstone to see.

Given that Count Zeleph always seemed like Count Bergstone's silent and introverted follower, this show of assertiveness was quite a shift in attitude. Count Bergstone wasn't angry with him, though. He took off his cape, placed it on a hanger on the wall, and sank into the sofa in the corner of his office. He'd known his brother-in-law for many years, so what was the point of being pretentious around him now? There was no need to greet him formally anymore.

"Here you are, dear brother-in-law," Count Zeleph said, holding out a glass full of amber-colored alcohol.

Count Bergstone took the glass and downed it in one go. It was a strong drink, distilled several times over. He felt the alcohol burn in his intestines, but after the work he'd done that night, it was a satisfying feeling.

"Here you are,' you say. This is my alcohol, Elnan," Count Bergstone grumbled.

Count Zeleph nodded with a grin. "I see your meeting went well,"

he said. "Congratulations are in order." He was able to surmise the meeting's outcome through his brother-in-law's expression and attitude.

"As astute as ever, Elnan," Count Bergstone said, giving him a tired smile. "Your observational skills always leave me impressed."

"Oh, not at all. I've simply known you for far too long." Count Zeleph tipped the bottle to Count Bergstone's now-empty glass and, in his usual joking tone, added, "Not as long as your lovely wife, of course."

Count Bergstone shrugged at his brother-in-law. "I see. Well, since you can read my heart so well, I'd do well not to make enemies out of the two of you. It's clear you'll beat me before the battle even starts."

As a politician, Count Bergstone had survived many a political struggle, and he rarely let his true intentions show in his gestures and expressions. He knew to smile during hardship and weep when he was truly rejoicing. His performance even put some professional actors to shame.

Only two people could see through Count Bergstone's act. One of them was his beloved wife, who'd been his partner for many years. She would never miss even the slightest change in his behavior. They interacted every day, after all.

That wasn't to say that living together meant a couple would understand each other perfectly. If they did, divorce rates wouldn't be rising in modern times. But spending time together certainly helped one know their partner. If nothing else, his wife knew him much better than a stranger who had only spoken with him for a few minutes.

This made Count Zeleph's deep understanding of Count Bergstone all the stranger. They were trusted relatives, yes, but they governed different territories and lived apart from each other. Even if their fiefdoms were adjacent, they were still two independent nobles, so the time they spent together was limited.

They only met during scheduled dinner parties or public events like balls, meaning they didn't have much time to foster their friendship. They could exchange letters, but written correspondence had its limits. Despite that, Count Zeleph knew Count Bergstone very well. In a sense, he knew Bergstone even better than Bergstone's wife did.

The reason was Count Zeleph's discerning eye, which allowed him to see into people's hearts. Its accuracy and sharpness were almost supernatural. However, those around him would see such a talent as dangerous.

That's why he doesn't take the front stage when it comes to politics, Count Bergstone thought.

He looked at Count Zeleph, who was still wearing his usual smile. His pudgy physique and amicable features didn't make him look silly, per se, but he didn't look particularly bright either. Not even Count Bergstone could claim otherwise.

But Elnan's real worth isn't in his looks.

The faces of two men surfaced in Count Bergstone's mind. One was their beloved, deceased father-in-law Marquis Ernest. He'd lost a political struggle with Duke Gelhart, leader of the nobles' faction, but before that, he'd served as Rhoadseria's prime minister and held considerable power and authority. His political prowess and his understanding of people were undeniable.

The men Marquis Ernest chose to be his beloved daughters' grooms were the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph. At the time, the gossipers in the royal court were unsure as to why he'd chosen Count Zeleph. All kinds of slanderous rumors had circulated, from stories of a hearty bribe to speculation of an unexpected pregnancy forcing the marquis to legitimize the marriage.

Normally, no noble would stand for such obscene, slanderous rumors. That someone would even start such rumors was a major issue in and of itself. Nevertheless, Marquis Ernest hadn't let the words of others sway him. He'd refused to annul his daughter's betrothal to Elnan Zeleph, proof that the marquis had seen Count Zeleph's value.

One other man sees Elnan's true value.

Count Bergstone was thinking of the young conqueror he'd sworn his service to just earlier tonight.

He probably thinks Elnan is more useful than me... A hint of envy pricked at Count Bergstone's heart, but it was only momentary. This is absurd. What am I, a child?

Count Bergstone's talents lay elsewhere. He was skilled at politics and intrigue. He was acting like a fish envying a bird for its wings, or a bird envying a fish for its ability to swim. Wanting to have a perfect talent was natural—such emotions encouraged people to propel themselves to greater heights—but one couldn't let envy blind them and cloud their judgment. After all, the two counts each had an important role to play.

"Now, let's hear it. What are our lord's orders?" Count Zeleph asked, placing the bottle on the table. There wasn't so much as a hint of kindness in his eyes now. His gaze glinted like a blade.

"Yes, well... The lord asked me to tell you a number of things," Count Bergstone began.

He relayed what their new master had said to his brother-in-law. The explanation took a while—roughly thirty minutes or so. Count Bergstone talked on, while Count Zeleph listened and remained silent.

"That's all for the time being. Is there anything you're unclear

on?" Count Bergstone asked, concluding his briefing and refilling his empty glass.

Count Zeleph slowly shook his head. "No... It's just that, while I made the choice knowingly, I did feel some guilt. But given what you said, I was thinking that we were right to turn to his side. That's all. I think the evening party will go as our lord plans."

These were Count Zeleph's true feelings. His and his brother-in-law's noble houses were respectable families who'd been in power since the dawn of the kingdom. Only the head of a house could truly appreciate the weight and meaning of that history. No matter how foolish their sovereign might be, becoming traitors required a great deal of courage.

Even after they'd made the choice to betray their queen, their hearts still wavered. Not even Count Zeleph was immune to that kind of fear. Every day, he would feel conflicted about his choice. Was Ryoma Mikoshiba really a ruler worth serving...?

I don't have any doubts anymore, Count Zeleph thought, but...

After listening to Count Bergstone's explanation, Count Zeleph understood what Ryoma's real aim was. His plan was terrifying. However, no plan, no matter how masterfully crafted, was perfect.

"Dear brother-in-law..." Count Zeleph murmured.

"What is it, Elnan?" Count Bergstone asked, a bit puzzled by his hesitance.

Even from Count Zeleph's point of view, their new lord's abilities were beyond satisfactory. But while the lord's plans were justified, they weren't perfect.

Though, considering his origins, this might be good enough.

Ryoma was originally a wandering adventurer and nothing more before he rose to nobility. He wasn't a born noble of Rhoadseria, so he didn't fully understand the bonds between different Rhoadserian noble families. Count Zeleph normally wouldn't even bring this up. It was clear Ryoma's plans were effective enough as they were.

But it does feel like we could take this one step further.

The problem was Count Zeleph's position.

Yes, that man... Gennou Igasaki, was it? He's quite skilled, but he hasn't established himself within the country enough yet.

Count Zeleph had only exchanged a few words with Gennou, so he knew only the man's name and face. Zeleph knew to pay attention to him, though, since he was in Ryoma Mikoshiba's inner circle.

But the question is, do I tell the lord about this or not...?

The correct answer would be to tell him. Since he acknowledged Ryoma as his new master, it was his duty to do so. All the same, capable people could be overconfident about their abilities and refuse to accept other people's opinions, and while Count Zeleph trusted

Ryoma's character and prowess, that didn't necessarily extend to the people working under him. Besides, the two counts were new retainers who'd only recently sworn loyalty to the Mikoshiba barony. Newcomers were always treated harshly, no matter where one went, and causing needless friction between them and the Mikoshiba barony's existing retainers would be unwise.

This might be a bad play.

If the Mikoshiba barony's entire policy was wrong, Count Zeleph wouldn't hesitate to advise them to act otherwise, but their plan was still a good one, and not at all mistaken. It simply wasn't quite ideal. Even if Count Zeleph were to offer his advice to improve things, it would only increase their chances from ninety percent to one hundred percent. Such a small improvement made Count Zeleph waver.

It seemed Count Bergstone could sense his brother-in-law's indecisiveness, because he said, "Don't hesitate. We chose to serve him, so you must do your duty as his vassal."

Count Bergstone's words were firm and unyielding, and they convinced Count Zeleph to steel his resolve. His talents lay in strategy, and he knew it. For him to do his duty properly, though, he needed a ruler who would believe in him. Without such a lord to serve, nothing would change. He would lurk in his brother-in-law's shadow, hiding his talents.

"Very well, brother-in-law," Count Zeleph replied. "I will speak to him posthaste. And after that, we will visit Viscount Orglen."

Count Zeleph reached for the bottle on the table and brought it to his lips, gulping down its amber-colored contents like he was resolving to set out to the battlefield.

Chapter 3: The Feast Begins

Carriage wheels ground against the flagstone highway leading to the capital's outskirts, the pale moonlight shining down on it. The vehicle was carrying two men—at least, one of them was obviously a man. He appeared to be about forty years old and slightly over 180 centimeters tall. He was burly and well-built, so much so that he looked like a bear. His forearms were about as thick as a woman's thighs.

For all that, the most eye-catching thing about this man was the black leather eyepatch covering his right eye. A straight line extending from his brow, down his eyelids, and onto his cheek indicated he'd lost his eye in battle—usually a crippling injury. The scent of violence oozed from him, and even as he sat dressed in fine silk, he looked like the kind of person one would want to avoid. His shining, clean-shaven head only accentuated his vicious appearance.

No one would look at this man and assume he might be a woman, but the same could not be said of the other person in the carriage. Few people could immediately guess the young man sitting opposite of him was a man. He was certainly dressed like a man, but his slender physique gave him an androgynous appearance. He seemed to be in his early to midtwenties and was much shorter than the bald man, perhaps 160 centimeters tall. His tailored silk outfit, adorned with golden thread, spoke of his high social standing.

The young man was surely blessed by the god of beauty. His skin was white, his complexion was clear, and his eyelashes were long. His wavy golden locks were arranged to hang just above the nape of his neck. Every aspect of his appearance was in perfect balance. Anyone who laid eyes on him would be taken aback by his beauty.

He was descended from a venerated family founded by a knight who served the first king and founder of Rhoadseria. At present, his family held territory in Rhoadseria's east, where they were charged with keeping watch over the Myest border. No one in Rhoadseria's aristocracy would be ignorant of his family's name.

Be that as it may, his family's grand prestige was a thing of the past now. Back when they worked alongside Marquis Ernest, who was the Rhoadserian prime minister at the time, the family had been incredibly powerful, but when they lost in the power struggle with Duke Gelhart, their political standing and authority had greatly

diminished. Nonetheless, the family's long history traced back to the kingdom's founding, and they were still counted among the kingdom's prominent nobles. They certainly weren't the sort of family an upstart baron who came from obscurity could invite to his evening party.

In this world's aristocracy, nobles only sent invitations to other nobles of equal or lower rank. There were cases where low-ranking nobles invited high-ranking aristocrats, of course, but that was mostly in cases where they were related either by blood or through marriage.

Neither the bald man nor the young man were related to the Mikoshiba barony in any way. In fact, they'd never even met Baron Mikoshiba. The very fact that they'd received an invitation from him was unthinkable. If they were to react in anger, asking if this mere letter of invitation was some thinly veiled insult, Ryoma would be hard-pressed to defend himself. It would be a grave affront, even though their house had been declining in recent years.

Indignation seethed in the bald man's heart like bubbling lava, but the young man sitting opposite of him just smiled.

"If you're that displeased by it, you could have ignored the invitation," the young man said, laughing aloud. "House McMaster is a line of viscounts. Nothing would happen if we missed Baron Mikoshiba's evening party."

His laughter was a siren's song, soothing and bewitching to all who heard it.

The bald man's expression turned bitter. "You say that when you know things aren't as simple as that?"

"Well, yes, I suppose they aren't." The younger man shrugged apologetically. "Considering the Mikoshiba barony's power..."

In truth, both the bald man's indignation and the young man's analysis were correct. For a Rhoadserian noble, Baron Mikoshiba was acting illogically, so much so that it could even trigger a war between noble houses. In that regard, the bald man's anger was understandable, but the fact remained that the Mikoshiba barony had enough power to act illogically if it so pleased. Though it was a low-ranking noble house, the Mikoshiba barony had more actual power and achievements under its belt than any other Rhoadserian noble house.

In the last civil war, Ryoma Mikoshiba almost single-handedly installed Queen Lupis on the throne despite her initially weak position. During O'tormea's invasion of Xarooda, he went alongside Helena Steiner and successfully brought the war to a truce. And on top of all that, he won a war against Count Salzberg, ruler of the north, and the ten houses serving under him. Being adept at winning wars was a gift, both figuratively and in practice. The only nobles who would challenge the Mikoshiba barony in a power struggle head-on

right now were either extremely influential or foolishly suicidal.

What's more, the invitation from the Mikoshiba barony came with accompanying notes signed by Count Bergstone, Count Zeleph, and Helena Steiner. All three of them had gained significant influence following Queen Lupis's rise to the throne.

All that, coupled with the McMasters' own desire to restore their family's prestige, meant that ignoring Ryoma's invitation wasn't an option, even if he was an arrogant upstart. The bald man, the younger man's father, may have been stubborn, but despite his bearlike appearance, he was no fool. He could judge the situation for what it was.

That was exactly why the younger man wished his father would keep his eyes fixed a few steps ahead.

If you know we can't refuse, consider our future actions too, the young man thought as he sighed and glanced at his father.

Saying no wasn't an option, so complaining about it aloud was foolish. Letting the other party know he was displeased would be terribly unwise.

I won't say he shouldn't feel any displeasure whatsoever, but at least be smart enough to not let it show.

It's said that all social interactions are a form of acting, but when a person is disgruntled, it shows in their every action and gesture. Seeing as the walls had ears, there was no telling when or where someone might be listening in. True, the odds of their conversation in a private carriage leaking to the Mikoshiba barony were one in a thousand, if not one in ten thousand, but one bad word reaching the wrong ears was all it took to cause a fatal disaster.

I suppose I should be happy he knows better than to say things like that to the other person's face.

The young man did think his father was troublesome at times, but he couldn't very well forsake him. The elder McMaster's personality was less that of a noble and more that of a warrior. In fact, he'd served as a royal guard before inheriting his title, and his personality was rather impulsive. If monsters appeared in their domain, he would personally fight them, and he had the martial prowess to do so. Disregarding whether his actions were wise, he was willing to put his life at risk for his commoners, and that was commendable.

He also competently governed the fiefdom itself. He wasn't exceptionally good at it, but the people trusted his honest, stable character. Many of Rhoadseria's nobles were scum, but in contrast, the bald man's ability and attitude were admirable. This was exactly why the young man wished his father would hide his feelings, so as to better protect the McMaster viscounty.

The young man furrowed his brow.

Something's going to happen at tonight's party. The question is what.

Viscount McMaster had heard that Ryoma was called to the capital by a subpoena from the House of Lords. The pretense for the summons was to testify as a witness, but most would assume he was actually being called for a trial—for starting a war and stealing the territory of the ten houses of the north.

Both were serious crimes, but generally, territory disputes between nobles didn't develop into a major problem. A noble could demand reparations for lost land, but the nobility believed that justice favored the winner. In most cases, people from other noble families would mediate the matter and be done with it.

But this time, things were different. In addition to Count Salzberg's death, two-thirds of the ten houses had been wiped out. Since the aristocracy stressed the importance of blood ties and they themselves had ties by marriage with other noble families, Ryoma's actions left them with the worst possible impression. The fact that not a single family in the House of Lords stood up for Ryoma spoke loudly to that.

He might be capable, but in the end he's just an upstart. He has no connections with other noble families.

If his only plan to improve his standing among the nobles was this evening party, it would be just a drop in the bucket given how bad his position was. There was no chance it would get him out of this predicament.

In the end, human relations were the same, be it between nobles or commoners. A relationship was based on how much time one spent with another person and how many words were exchanged. Some friendships were like in the movies, where a life-and-death situation could bring people closer, but situations like that were uncommon. In most cases, friendship and intimacy were proportionate to time spent together.

There's a chance Baron Mikoshiba is enough of a fool to be ignorant of that, but...

In the days since he'd received the invitation, the young man had tried to use all of House McMaster's connections to gather information on Ryoma. As one might surmise from his father's personality, their information network was by no means effective, but he pieced together what information they did gather and concluded that Ryoma wasn't at all that foolish.

Then why...?

Seeing his son so silent, Viscount Diggle McMaster asked, "What's wrong? Are you thinking about something?"

Shaking his head, the young man looked up at the moon from the carriage's window. "No, I'm just wondering why Baron Mikoshiba

invited us. That's all."



Black carriages passed through the mansion's gates one after another. The most lavish evening party ever held in this two-hundred-year-old estate was about to begin. Viscount McMaster and his son stepped out of their carriage and were greeted at the entrance to the mansion.

Before them, lined on either side of a red carpet, were twenty or so fair women, all clad in maid uniforms made of silk. Standing in the middle of the carpet was a large man, his black hair combed down. He was dressed in a formal outfit made of silk, its primary color black.

As colors went, black was inoffensive, but it wasn't very interesting either. The man wearing it must have known that too, because the sleeves and lapel were inlaid with silver and gold threads that accentuated the outfit. Maybe he thought that wearing something too gaudy might offend his guests.

"Welcome, and thank you for coming, Viscount McMaster."

Ryoma Mikoshiba smiled, placed a hand over his chest, and bowed elegantly. A pair of twins—one with blonde hair and the other silver—bowed too, and the other maids behind them followed suit. They moved perfectly in sync.

Even a bow wasn't as simple as one might think. The timing and angle required training to master. Within the aristocracy, manners were a form of art one needed to master, a necessary skill when it came to politics. It was an unspoken rule of sorts, and depending on the situation, flawed etiquette could make heads fly—literally.

"I should be thanking you. The head of the family greeting us at the gates is quite the honor," Viscount McMaster replied with a smile. He knew better than to let his displeasure show in front of the person in question.

"I'm honored to greet members of the great House McMaster, which has served Rhoadseria since its founding. Nothing would please me more than to learn proper conduct from you. Oh, but pardon me for keeping you here at the door. Your host will show you the way, so please relax in the hall."

One of the maids led Viscount McMaster and his son into the mansion.

By all accounts, Viscount McMaster's first encounter with Ryoma Mikoshiba seemed cordial, but the displeasure that burned in the viscount's heart was already starting to give way to another emotion. Not a positive one, of course, but something much nastier.

Hmph. He at least trained his servants well. Or maybe they were originally Count Salzberg's servants. Either way, I'll have to be cautious.

The maids before him moved in perfect unison, going about their business with such speed and efficiency that it resembled an elegant dance. It was hard to believe that servants of such quality were under the employ of an upstart baron.

It was said that children mirrored their parents, and most people understood that a misbehaving child reflected poorly on their parents. Before an infant gained their own ego and learned to speak, they only had their parents' example to follow. The saying went that the child was father to the man, but it went without saying that a child's personality and ideology tended to mirror that of their parents.

That wasn't limited to children and parents either. A superior's actions and words influenced their subordinates, and those subordinates reflected on the company as a whole.

The servants the viscount was watching seemed well disciplined, a positive reflection on their master. Also, from a cursory glance, the estate appeared to be in good shape. Not a single speck of dust dirtied the floor, and not a single fold rumpled the carpets. The furnishings were placed meticulously too.

I assumed this place would still be in order, since it was Count Salzberg's estate initially, but...

As far as Viscount McMaster was aware, Count Salzberg had only stayed in the capital a handful of times, including when he inherited his title. Even then, he stayed at his estate within the capital, not in this one on the capital's outskirts. This estate was retained out of inertia, so to speak, because it had been passed down in House Salzberg for generations.

From what the viscount knew, not much was done to maintain it. His family was on relatively good terms with House Salzberg, so he knew that the servants working in this estate wouldn't be very motivated. Their master hadn't shown himself for a long while, and although they'd sworn loyalty even if the master of the house was gone, it was naive to assume that they'd uphold that oath given the circumstances.

Viscount McMaster thought of his own situation in comparison. He was a servant of Rhoadseria, but he didn't conform to all of Queen Lupis's policies, and he wasn't willing to invest all of his family's resources to support her.

I suppose it's possible the mansion's housekeeper just happens to be very devoted to their job.

Either way, the outcome was the same. The question was if Ryoma himself managed the servants this way, or if a skilled housekeeper was running things.

It seems this Mikoshiba man has some understanding of what it means to be a noble. That's surprising, considering his background...

Viscount McMaster's opinion of Ryoma rose somewhat. He threw a glance over his shoulder and met the eyes of the young man following him. The younger man nodded at him, and Viscount McMaster sighed. He was annoyed with the pitying glances the younger man had leveled at him as he insulted Baron Mikoshiba on their trip here. As it turned out, his judgment was wrong.

I'll admit I might have underestimated Baron Mikoshiba.

Since Rhoadseria's class system was very rigid, it was rare for a commoner to become a noble. This was true all across the western continent; very few examples existed of commoners becoming nobles or even just high-ranking knights. There were, however, some low-ranking knights and bureaucrats who'd come from commoner origins. They weren't nobles in the strictest sense of the word, but they weren't commoners anymore either. In fact, most commoners would regard them as part of the ruling class, no different from a born noble.

The same didn't hold true for the nobles, though. They saw the low-ranking knights and bureaucrats as, at best, honorary nobles—or rather, faux nobles. This was because many people misunderstood what the nobility was. A person didn't become a noble just because they'd received a title, and nobles with long family histories were disgusted with the idea of an upstart noble.

Viscount McMaster was led deeper into the estate until they eventually stopped before a sturdy wooden door. The maid leading them slowly reached for the handle. As the door swung open, Viscount McMaster felt his breath stick in his throat.

“This is...”

The room was as large as the royal palace's audience chamber and equivalent to a modern hotel's event hall. Countless people filled the room, laughing and conversing.

Just how many nobles did he call here? Besides...

Viscount McMaster hadn't thought the place would be deserted. Some powerful individuals had sent their notes vouching for this event. They were from Helena Steiner, a general and the Ivory Goddess of War; Count Bergstone, a noble whose political talents the late prime minister Marquis Ernest had recognized; and Count Zeleph, a noble whose latent political power hid behind his persona of an airheaded fool who stood in his brother-in-law's shadow.

As much as the Rhoadserian nobles might have hated the upstart noble, they couldn't very well ignore an invitation from Baron Mikoshiba. Still, Viscount McMaster hadn't expected this many people to be here, once again underestimating the situation.

Is that Count Blackhide? And there, by the wall, the one laughing... Is that Count Heimbel?

Both of their noble families had supported Marquis Ernest during

his tenure as prime minister and, like Count Bergstone, had been forced to spend years secluded in their fiefdoms.

"I see. It seems Count Bergstone has made his choice," said a familiar voice from behind Viscount McMaster.

The viscount turned around. Standing there was a tall man, his blond hair combed back and his stylish mustache impeccably groomed. He was smiling.

The viscount was by no means short, but the man dwarfed him by ten centimeters. He looked to be in his midforties. His physique was balanced and toned and lacked any of the pudginess middle-aged men often had, but he wasn't skinny or bony. Rather, he had an athletic build. More than anything, he exuded elegance. It was easy to imagine all the attention he must have received at social events in his youth.

"You... Is that you, Leonard?"

Viscount McMaster couldn't mask his surprise at seeing his estranged cousin, with whom he hadn't so much as exchanged letters with in years. There was no joy in his expression. If anything, he looked like he'd just run into someone he much preferred to never see again.

"It's been a long time, Diggle. Over a decade, no?" Viscount Orglen said, winking.

"Yes... That sounds about right..." Viscount McMaster replied, smiling vaguely.

As pretentious as ever. Irritating man.

Leonard Orglen came from a renowned viscount family. Both House Orglen's and House McMaster's ancestors had been knights in service to the first king and founder of Rhoadseria, so despite the distance between their fiefdoms, the two houses were very close. They often sent their sons and daughters to each other, creating bonds of matrimony.

In recent years, the younger sister of Viscount McMaster's father—in other words, his aunt—was sent to marry into House Orglen, and she gave birth to Leonard. If fraternity and friendship made for closer bonds, then Leonard was no doubt Viscount McMaster's close ally.

I know that, but...

Allies though they were, Viscount McMaster found it difficult to put up with Leonard. High society was a hostile, cutthroat environment, and getting by with nothing but the help of one's retainers was exceedingly difficult. One needed other noble families on their side, which was why nobles married among themselves—to bind their families by blood. Nevertheless, regardless of the fact that Viscount McMaster should rely on Leonard, he had his reasons for refusing to do so.

That wasn't to say he was supposed to blindly trust Leonard just

because they were relatives. In this world, even parents and children could kill one another over matters of inheritance, so it was wise to be wary of his cousin. But for reasons that had nothing to do with his survival as a noble, Viscount McMaster couldn't bring himself to improve relations with Leonard. He simply couldn't like the man.

Unlike the brusque and martial-minded Viscount McMaster, Viscount Orglen was a stylish, sophisticated man. He'd played music since his infancy, and both his singing and his performance with the zither could rival that of a professional troubadour. Were it not for his position as the elder son and heir to his family's headship, he would have made a name for himself in the palace's orchestra.

He was also skilled at dancing, both classical and more contemporary styles, and most nobles close to him said he was perhaps the finest dancer they knew. He'd even been Queen Lupis's instructor in the performing arts for a time.

Like Viscount McMaster, Viscount Orglen was a mere governor on the frontier, but unlike Viscount McMaster, he had connections with the royal family and was well-known within the capital. Both he and Viscount McMaster were members of the late Marquis Ernest's faction, but Viscount Orglen led a life that was nearly the opposite of Viscount McMaster's, who'd remained in his domain since they lost the political struggle with Duke Gelhart.

Viscount Orglen's skill in the arts just made things worse. He was a genius that achieved outstanding results in everything he tried. He was also handsome, which made him too perfect for Viscount McMaster to like. If the two of them were to stand side by side, it was clear whose company people would prefer between a fashionable dandy and a bald, bearlike man. Viscount McMaster was only there to highlight Viscount Orglen's good points.

Leonard, however, seemingly had no intention of taking Viscount McMaster's feelings into consideration. "Now, we should probably move away. We shouldn't block the entrance, after all!" he said, gesturing to an unoccupied corner.

There's something he wants to discuss, isn't there?

Viscount McMaster caught Leonard's meaning. The two of them had been estranged for over a decade, so he couldn't be looking for idle chatter. Rekindling an old friendship wasn't unheard of, but the place and timing being what it was, that didn't seem to be his aim either.

The young man behind Viscount McMaster nodded, and the two of them followed Viscount Orglen.

One of the maids circling around the party noticed them walking across the room and called out to them. "Would you like some?" She was carrying a silver tray in her right hand, and on it were glasses full

of amber-colored alcohol.

“Oh... Yes, thank you.” Viscount Orglen took two glasses from the tray and handed one to Viscount McMaster. “You’ll drink, yes?”

He basically forced the glass into Viscount McMaster’s hands, then brought his own glass to his nose to take in the scent. He didn’t wait for Viscount McMaster’s reply before he tasted the wine.

“Wonderful,” he remarked. “It’s sweet, easy to drink, and goes down smoothly. Well ripened, as white wine goes. I’m guessing this is a Qwiltantian Rott Grande?”

The maid gave him a soft smile, bowed her head, and returned to her job.

“Ah, I guess I got it wrong. So was it made in the Torphana Empire, on the central continent’s eastern side?” Viscount Orglen wondered, jokingly shrugging his shoulders. “Either way, she’s well educated, given she knew not to correct a guest’s mistake.”

Viscount Orglen’s gestures were stylish and elegant, implying that he was so used to acting this way that it came naturally to him. He then turned to Viscount McMaster, who still hadn’t sipped from his glass.

“It’s fine wine, Diggle. Better than what you’ll find in the palace, even. I’m not sure why you’re refusing to drink it, but a mere provincial governor like you won’t get many chances to drink something like this. You should relish the chance, if you ask me.”

Seeing his cousin’s satisfied smile, Viscount McMaster glared at him, his expression bitter.

Are you mad? We’re in enemy territory here!

For all they knew, the wine was poisoned, but Leonard scoffed at his cousin’s logic.

“I understand what you must be thinking, being a knight and all, but think about it. What are the odds that Baron Mikoshiba would go this far to assassinate a small noble from the middle of nowhere like you? If you really think this is what it’s all about, I’m sorry, but you’re being terribly self-conscious. Now set your stupid pride aside and enjoy the occasion, I say.”

Viscount McMaster went red in the face. The primary reason he hadn’t tasted the wine was because he was jealous that a minor baron could host a party on this scale, and Leonard had pointed it out to his face.

“To begin with,” Leonard continued, “Rhoadseria’s Ivory Goddess of War and the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph all vouched for this evening party. Given their clout, I doubt they’d stand for such methods. Besides, if he wanted to kill his guests, he wouldn’t be serving such fine wine. But if it worries you that much, I guess I could sample from your wine first.” He laughed and drank the remainder of

the wine in his glass.

Now that Leonard had said as much, Viscount McMaster's dignity was at risk. If people were to gossip about him being a coward, it would damage his warrior's pride.

The young man behind him nodded, so Viscount McMaster gulped down the liquid in the glass. As he did, a bomb of aroma exploded in his nose.

"Well, how do you like it?" Leonard asked. "Was it worth giving up your petty pride for?"

Viscount McMaster only managed a dazed nod.

This is...

The flavor overtook his mouth with a richness and sweetness that dwarfed anything he'd tasted before. He wasn't confident enough in his diction to describe the wine, though. What's more, it was cooled to the ideal temperature for white wine.

It was perfect in every way. Even parties hosted by the royal house rarely served its guests drinks of this quality.

And it's being served to all the guests here, at that, Viscount McMaster thought, looking around the party hall.

There were nobles from around thirty houses here, and since some of them had come with escorts, there were nearly two hundred guests. Offering such lavish hospitality to every single one of them must have required an absurd amount of money, much more than what could be written off as the scrambling of a nobody who'd stumbled into his title.

How can someone governing that cursed peninsula have the funds to pay for this?

Before Viscount McMaster could fully submerge himself in his thoughts, Leonard pulled him back to reality.

"Oh, looks like the host is showing himself."

Viscount McMaster gazed at the entrance, where Ryoma Mikoshiba, followed by three others, entered the room.



"Everything's going well so far, but now's where things really get started," Ryoma whispered to Helena and the two counts standing behind him, who all silently nodded.

At first glance, the three of them seemed to be the same as always, but on closer inspection, their expressions were a bit stiff and tense. This was quite unusual. Helena was Rhoadseria's general and a seasoned war hero who'd survived countless battles. Count Bergstone was no warrior, but he was adept at politics. And his stepbrother Count Zeleph, though mild-mannered, hid a talent for information warfare behind his unassuming appearance.

Soldiers and politicians weren't the same, but all three of them were exceptional individuals, both in Rhoadseria and in the entirety of the western continent. They'd attended countless evening parties in the past, so what did they have to be tense about now? Anyone this nervous from a simple party wasn't fit to lead a country.

Those who knew what Helena and the two counts were usually like would've been shocked to see them so high-strung now, but one couldn't fault them for being so nervous. The Mikoshiba barony could rise and fall with this party's outcome. To Ryoma, this moment was as critical as when he crossed the River Thebes during the civil war, or when he fought Count Salzberg in the battle for Epirus.

Since the general and the two counts had decided to devote themselves to House Mikoshiba, they shared its fate. They were under enormous pressure, even when compared to Ryoma. Perhaps they stood to lose even more than he did. Both counts were from respected noble houses with long histories, and their subjects' lives hung in the balance. Helena was in danger of losing her glory as Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War. Not to mention, the lives of their families and their trusted retainers were on the line as well. They'd gone all in on a massive gamble, so some tension was to be expected.

"We're taking a pretty big risk here," Ryoma said, trying to dispel their anxiety, "but we prepared for this, so there shouldn't be any problems during the evening party. Try not to be too nervous and just enjoy the evening." He shrugged playfully. "We're gonna be serving some great food."

The Mikoshiba barony had put a lot of time and effort into planning this event. For one, a hundred experienced knights, handpicked from the Bertrand and Galveria baronies, guarded the mansion's large garden. They were directly under the command of Count Salzberg's Twin Blades, Robert and Signus, who now served Ryoma. Both were first-class warriors, so much so that some believed they could take Helena's place as general. Having those two guard the mansion indicated that Ryoma was extremely serious and had his doubts about what might happen tonight.

It might have been excessive of me, but it's better than being careless and taken by surprise. I do feel bad for those two, though.

Many nobles were invited to this evening party, and normally potential heirs like Robert and Signus would attend such an event. While their inheritance wasn't officiated yet, Ryoma stood to profit from their gaining connections in noble society. Despite this, he'd asked them to work behind the scenes, which was somewhat of a shock.

Of course, Ryoma knew the chances of an attack were slim.
But they aren't zero.

The worst scenario Ryoma envisioned was Lupis ordering the royal guards to attack. If that were to happen, Robert and Signus would serve as their rear guard while Ryoma and his entourage regrouped with three hundred soldiers stationed in Count Salzberg's other estate and Lione's detachment stationed in the forest surrounding this residence. After that, they'd return to their main base in the Wortenia Peninsula.

Ryoma had planned everything out to the tiniest detail and had covered every contingency. His preparation was a testament to how much hung in the balance tonight.

Ryoma turned to the three people behind him, his eyes full of cold calmness and burning determination.

"Let's get started, then."

With those words, the heavy doors before them opened, and Ryoma stepped into the room. As he did, he felt many pairs of eyes fix on him. Most of those gazes were dark and burning with negativity. The guests didn't greet their host with applause, which was what Ryoma had told Laura and Sara was proper etiquette for his world's high society.

Reality was harsh, even for Ryoma.

Scorn, envy, anger, a hint of caution... A few seem somewhat friendly toward me, but most of the guests seem to dislike me. Sakuya's report did mention that most nobles in Rhoadseria were like this, so this isn't a surprise, but I guess they really do hate the idea of an upstart like me gaining success. How petty.

Ryoma sighed, pretending not to notice their gazes. He knew that he wasn't welcome in Rhoadseria's aristocracy in the first place, but still, such blatant hatred made him uneasy.

Ryoma understood that their feelings about him weren't particularly strange. In fact, he called them petty for it. This behavior wasn't limited to Rhoadseria's nobles either. People harbored darkness in their hearts even in the most ordinary situations. Not many genuinely wished to see their peers succeed.

Well, surprisingly few people can come to terms with their emotions like these two.

Ryoma glanced at the two middle-aged counts behind him. He'd expected the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph to envy him too. They'd bought the ire of the nobles' faction's leader, Duke Gelhart, and had been in a bad place for years. Despite being from renowned noble families, they had to lead their subjects and deal with continued harassment while being effectively trapped in their domains. They took pride in the fact that they'd kept their regime stable for years under such conditions.

They had the abilities needed to rule and the achievements to

match them. Considering most nobles in Rhoadseria saw themselves as a privileged class and shirked their duties to enjoy the aristocratic lifestyle, the two counts were without a doubt first-class nobles.

That was precisely why they had mixed feelings about Ryoma. Both counts were in their midforties, but Ryoma hadn't even reached his twenties. In this world, people married early in life, and he was young enough to be their child, maybe even a grandchild for some other nobles.

Yet they were gambling their entire futures on such a young man. They'd be insane if they didn't feel nervous. They were thankful to Ryoma, yes. The nobles' faction loathed both of them and basically waited for them to die in their domains, but Ryoma delivered them from that fate with his wit and wisdom.

They were still only human, though, and they couldn't help but cringe at a boy like him being this powerful and influential. All the same, the reason it took Count Bergstone so long to join with Ryoma was partially because of his lingering loyalty to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria.

Ryoma didn't resent them for it, nor did he see them as lesser men. Each person was unique, but deep down all men could envy others' success and begrudge their own misfortune. The question was whether they kept it from showing or let it all out. Did they use their negative emotions to drag others down or to improve themselves?

The sad reality was that few people were like Count Bergstone, who could suppress his emotions and compromise. In that regard, people were the same, be it this world or Ryoma's. So how would he deal with those narrow-minded people?

Ideally, I'd never need to get involved with them at all, but unfortunately...

The best way to be successful was to avoid the influence of problematic people. It was best to gently reject their intervention whenever possible. After all, arguments based on emotion never reached a compromise, and arguments based on logic often pushed the other party to become defensive. Being too insistent could devolve into a physical fight too. In the end, the more reasonable side had to compromise.

Sometimes a civil discussion solved the issue, but that usually took time. Bringing a third party in didn't always work either, and took both time and money. With all that in mind, avoiding such discussions to begin with was probably the wisest option.

In modern society, this applied to situations like changing schools due to bullying, or changing jobs due to harassment. Nevertheless, avoiding troublesome people wasn't always possible. A stalker couldn't always be evaded, and sometimes, one couldn't just walk

away and leave.

Ryoma was in one such situation now, but his options were fairly limited. He could either physically remove the enemy, or he could pressure them into submission. However, killing all these Rhoadserian nobles at this evening party would be much too risky. Even if he did do that, destroying Rhoadseria's ruling class would only destabilize the country to the point where it would cease to function.

Not that I care what happens to that woman, but I can't make this work unless I use everyone and everything I can.

In truth, Ryoma was in the process of starting up his own organization. He was at the point where he was considering expanding his company, and the most important factor in doing so was manpower. No matter how good the materials he gathered, they were pearls cast before swine unless he had capable people to make use of them.

To build up manpower from scratch, he would need time to train his team accordingly. The ideal solution would be to gather skilled workers from the start, and stealing said workers from a rivaling company would make him stronger and his competitors weaker—killing two birds with one stone.

Let's get started, then.

Ryoma signaled with his eyes to one of the maids waiting in the room's corner. When he did, the maids picked up new trays prepared with drinks and began handing them out to the guests.

"Master Ryoma, here." Laura, who'd appeared beside him at some point, handed him a glass.



Ryoma accepted it and addressed his guests. He greeted them, thanked them for coming, and then raised his glass.

“Cheers!”

The guests all raised their glasses. After confirming that they’d all done so, Ryoma signaled the Malfist sisters standing behind him.

“Now, I would like for you to enjoy the dishes we’ve prepared for you, as modest as they may be.”

At his words, the doors behind him opened wide, and a line of carts were wheeled into the hall.



Kikuna Samejima, clad in a white cook’s coat, walked down the red carpet. Having finished her primary job, she hurried to the party hall to fulfill her remaining role, which was to ensure the guests’ satisfaction.

Surely I can stop by for a little while, right?

She might be asked to prepare a few more dishes, but for the most part, she had things wrapped up. The cooks in the kitchen could handle any extra requests that might pop up, so her sneaking out of the kitchen shouldn’t cause much of a problem.

In many high-class restaurants that served French and western dishes, it was customary for the staff to explain the concepts and cooking processes of the dishes to the customers. It could be a waiter or the chef themselves, but either way, it was a performance meant to close the distance between the restaurant and its customers. To that end, Kikuna’s desire to see the guests’ reactions wasn’t at all unusual.

Well, honestly, I don’t really need to go there personally...

But she had a specific reason to go to the party hall.

Kikuna had originally specialized in French cuisine. Before she was summoned to this world, she was an experienced chef who’d undergone tutelage in a famous French restaurant. She’d won international cooking competitions too, which were a sure pathway to success.

After several years of training, Kikuna returned to Japan, hoping to become an independent chef while focusing on her homeland’s flavors. Sadly, that dream shattered all too easily when she was summoned to this world. Much like many otherworlders, she’d experienced how hellish it could be here.

Sudou told me to be careful, so I’ll need to act as natural as possible, but...

Kikuna was at this estate because Ryoma Mikoshiba had ordered Simone Christof to hire a chef for his party. Simone had issued a request to the guild, and the guild had lunged at the chance to accept.

A month later, Kikuna had the job.

There were two reasons Kikuna was chosen for Baron Mikoshiba's request. The first was to create common ground between Ryoma Mikoshiba, governor of the Wortenia Peninsula, and the guild. Wortenia was known as a cursed no-man's-land, but the monsters living there could be harvested for precious materials. Baron Mikoshiba also seemed to have a monopoly on endowed thaumaturgy equipment, which the guild suspected he got through trading with the demi-humans that inhabited the peninsula.

Also, until now, the peninsula had been home to pirates, so the guild hadn't actively interfered with it. However, once Ryoma purged the pirates from the land, the Mikoshiba barony had quickly built the city of Sirius, and it'd become their base of operations, allowing the barony to function within the peninsula.

With all that in play, the guild was highly interested in establishing a branch in Sirius, but so far their requests had all been rejected. In fact, Ryoma seemed to be so opposed to the idea that he forbade any and all adventurers from entering the region. The guild had tried to negotiate multiple times, but nothing had come of it.

That was until Ryoma made a request for a chef. The guild probably saw it as a windfall and had immediately scrambled to find the right person to answer Ryoma's request.

I can understand why they were so desperate...

It made sense that the guild would try to satisfy an uncooperative prospective business partner by going out of its way to do that person a favor. The guild hoped this would pave the way to a more welcoming relationship between it and the Mikoshiba barony.

Kikuna was here for another reason, but she didn't quite understand it. She'd been sent by request of one of the Organization's high officials, Akitake Sudou, but under two conditions: she was not to stand out, and she was not to do anything other than complete the tasks she was given.

There are so many rumors within the Organization about the Mikoshiba barony. When I was told to go work for the baron, I was sure they were going to ask me to poison him, but...

For a chef, the act of sullyng one's dish with poison was unforgivable. But Kikuna had already gone through this world's baptism, and since the request came from the Organization that had saved her from this hell, she would've swallowed her pride and done it anyway. After all, Kikuna had already dirtied her hands for the Organization in the past, though she hadn't resorted to poisoning to do it. She would mercilessly kill her targets, even if they were her own countrymen.

This time, however, Kikuna Samejima was asked to act as a chef

and nothing more. It was honestly an anticlimactic outcome.

Still, his ideas really are intriguing. I can see why Sudou is so fascinated with him.

She'd only spoken to Ryoma directly a handful of times, but it was more than enough for her to realize just how interesting he was.

That baked bass pie he asked me to make... It's probably a play on Talleyrand. What an idea...

She'd watched a maid carry off two dishes of the pie, yet she could only think of one explanation as to what the meaning behind them was.

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord was a skilled French politician and a renowned gourmet. He was an important figure in world history, having served under the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. He was also famous in the culinary world for having hired Marie-Antoine Carême, one of the forefathers of modern French cuisine. There were many anecdotes surrounding Talleyrand, including one about two trout.

One time, Talleyrand obtained two large trout. At the time, most ships used sails, and there was no way to refrigerate fish, so acquiring such large, wonderful trout was something only the most affluent people could do.

As a politician and a diplomat, Talleyrand wanted to use the trout to flaunt his riches and authority, yet he believed that serving two fish at the same time would seem pompous and needlessly draw the ire of his guests. Therefore, he came up with a plan. Talleyrand chose to make a show of dropping the fish to the floor, then serving the second fish in its place.

At first, his guests were drawn to the initial trout, marveling at its size. When their interest was piqued, the fish was spectacularly dropped to the floor, then the "replacement" dish was brought out at once. He'd crushed their expectations, only to build them back up again. By playing with people's emotions in such a way, he was able to turn surprise into awe.

Ryoma's decision to serve a baked bass pie resembled Talleyrand's scheme.

Although, it's not exactly the same...

Talleyrand had dreaded his guests' reaction, so he'd restrained his bragging, but Ryoma was doing the complete opposite.

This world has no refrigeration technology, and the capital is far from the sea, so serving such a large bass is enough of a feat. And on top of that, he had a plethora of expensive ingredients added to it.

The bass had been transported to the capital while maintaining its freshness. This alone would be enough to shock any guest, but Ryoma's trick didn't end there. The moonlight herbs and evening dew

mushrooms in the pie crust were normally used for nostrums, so only a handful of gourmets recognized them as delicacies. After tasting the pie, the guests would no doubt be surprised by the flavors in the dish.

Plus, there's the plates and the other dishes.

All the utensils and dinnerware for the party had been made with endowed thaumaturgy that retained warmth and detected poisons. These seals weren't remarkable on their own, but the sheer number of items was astonishing. There were over a thousand plates and platters overall, and enough knives and forks to accommodate hundreds of guests.

Kikuna couldn't even begin to imagine how much it would cost to apply endowed thaumaturgy to all of that. Not to mention, the food was served with all sorts of decorations and arrangements.

For instance, Count Heimbel's domain was famous for producing coal made of bamboo. Even so, coal was still just coal. It wasn't that noteworthy of a product. Be that as it may, Ryoma used bowls and steamer baskets made from Count Heimbel's bamboo to hold fruit and sweets.

No one would initially care whose domain the bamboo came from, but sooner or later, someone would notice. Even if they didn't, it wouldn't be a problem. As the host, Ryoma would certainly converse with the guests and casually mention it.

I bet they'll be surprised.

As a professional chef, Kikuna could tell that the bamboo was well-made and of high quality. What's more, bamboo goods were rare in this world, which made the baskets curious enough as it was. If Count Heimbel learned that they were made from his bamboo... Kikuna could easily guess how he'd react.

Tonight's party used products from other nobles' domains too.

The honey from Count Burkhide's domain is famous, and the apples from Viscount Orglen's domain are delicious.

What this all meant went without saying.

Many of the nobles here tonight will probably want to join the Mikoshiba barony's economical sphere. We need to be cautious of him.

Nothing mattered more to nobles than managing their domains, and when it came to preserving their family's honor, economic power mattered the most. Tonight's evening party would prove to them that their domains could be lucrative.

Particular conditions had to be met to make their money tree bear fruit, though. For one, they needed a market where they could sell their products. Tonight, they would surely realize that the Mikoshiba barony, which controlled the sea routes of northern Rhoadseria, was a viable market.

The result of this realization would shake the power balance in

Rhoadseria. It didn't matter how much the nobles might have come to loathe Ryoma. In the face of his overwhelming economic and military might, most would lose the will to oppose him, and if they stood to receive scraps at his table, they had all the more reason to lay down their arms.

I heard he was summoned here as a high schooler. I'm surprised he knew of Talleyrand.

Most chefs had heard of Talleyrand, but people without culinary backgrounds rarely knew of him. If nothing else, the trout story wasn't in world history textbooks for high school students.

Maybe he just happens to be interested in cuisine, but...

Kikuna soon reached the hall. Based on the music the orchestra was currently playing, they were in the middle of the ball. The guards opened the doors before her, allowing her inside, and sure enough, Ryoma Mikoshiba was in the middle of dancing with some noble lady.

The surrounding nobles watched his graceful steps with scorn. They were likely displeased that he wasn't humiliating himself in front of everyone.

Kikuna looked around and spotted the Malfist sisters standing together by one of the walls. They were watching Ryoma dance with satisfied smiles.

I see. So he covered all his bases to avoid the nobles' traps too.

It was hard to believe that Ryoma would be familiar with ballroom dancing as a high schooler, meaning he had to have acquired this skill after being summoned.

We have to be wary of him.

Holding on to that thought, Kikuna approached the Malfist sisters to ask the two girls clad in maid uniforms what their impressions of today's dishes were.

Chapter 4: A Deadly Trap

At the edge of the forest surrounding Pireas's outskirts, a carriage departed the back gate of Count Salzberg's detached estate. The sound of its wheels grinding against the flagstones echoed in the capital's streets.

Sitting within this carriage emblazoned with House McMaster's emblem, Diggle McMaster sighed heavily as he looked out the window. He could see the pale moonlight shining outside, but soon thick clouds shifted to block the glow.

It feels like a symbol of Rhoadseria's state.

When the evening party concluded, Viscount Orglen had mediated a conversation between Viscount McMaster and Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Thinking back on it, Viscount McMaster sighed again.

So that's Ryoma Mikoshiba...

He'd heard many rumors about Ryoma before now—some good, some bad—but rumors were simply that: baseless words and nothing more. Ryoma was known as a hero and a master swordsman, but Viscount McMaster had seen many knights on the battlefield lose their heads to soldiers. He saw leaders invite so-called capable people to develop their domains, only for their foolish policies to create large holes in tax revenue.

In this world, communications were limited to runners and letters, and as such, rumors were often far from the truth. Glory could inspire fallacy too. But even with that in mind, Diggle McMaster knew that the man he met tonight was a monster who exceeded all possible expectations. There was no other way to describe him.

"I can see why Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War would side with him," he muttered. "You don't think he investigated us too, do you?"

"Yes," said Rosetta McMaster, who sat opposite him. "He didn't say anything directly, but based on his tone, I believe he knows."

Rosetta looked like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Viscount McMaster saw a natural smile on her lips, a smile she hadn't shown since the day she'd discarded her life as a woman.

I really did place a great burden on you, didn't I? Viscount McMaster thought, his heart shaking with guilt.

Ever since her twin brother Grad passed away from a sudden illness, Rosetta McMaster had been forced to stop living as a woman. That didn't mean merely adopting a mannish personality either. She

changed her hairstyle, her attire, her manner of speech, and even her personality. She discarded her life to live in her brother's stead.

A woman masquerading as a man was quite the gamble. In most people's eyes, no matter how well a woman acted like a man, she was still a woman. She could maintain the facade for a few days or a few weeks, but doing so for years was impossible. The slightest gesture could ruin the disguise.

Nevertheless, being twins made the impossible possible, aided by the fact that Grad had passed away before reaching adolescence. So long as Rosetta minded her hairstyle and attire, she could pass as Grad.

For House McMaster, which prided itself on being warriors, an "effeminate man" was a shameful title, but this time it acted in Viscount McMaster's favor. Of course, Rosetta hadn't wanted to take her brother's place, but after long deliberation, she'd concluded that they had no choice. At the time, Viscount McMaster's only children were Grad and Rosetta.

Given how most nobles had multiple concubines, if not mistresses and lovers, to ensure their bloodline continued, this was altogether unusual. Perhaps the practice came entirely from the nobility's arrogance and drive to expand, but it was difficult to write it off as just that. To maintain one's family name, one needed to produce heirs who would carry on the bloodline. To do so, one had to stoop to any means necessary.

In a sense, it was like an insatiable survival instinct. Commoners, who were neither royalty nor nobility, couldn't understand this feeling, but when it came to ensuring one's house continued to exist, there was no better means of going about it.

Had Diggle McMaster decided not to honor his love for his legal wife and instead taken a concubine like a typical noble, Rosetta wouldn't have to live a man's life. But this was all a thing of the past now, and their meeting with Ryoma Mikoshiba tonight could change their entire lives.

"How much do you think he spent on this evening party?" Viscount McMaster asked.

"Probably more than our domain's yearly tax revenue," Rosetta replied. "The dishes and alcohol were all top-notch. And the orchestra...they were wonderful. We probably wouldn't receive hospitality like that in the queen's palace."

"Yes, I doubt we would. But he didn't just do this to welcome us, did he?"

Rosetta flashed a nasty smile. Ever since Viscount McMaster inherited his title, they'd attended many parties, but tonight was the first time they had seen so many luxuries lined up like that. Spices

from the central continent had washed away the stench from monster flesh and accentuated its flavor. The patterns on the plates indicated that they were imported from the eastern continent, and they had a smoothness that added a flair to the food. To top it all off, the dessert served at the end of their course was simply perfection.

Serving sweets in an edible vessel made of sugar is an amazing concept.

Viscount McMaster wasn't much for sweets, but not even he could stop eating it. Fruit picked from across the continent were submerged in jelly and served in a vessel that looked like glassware crafted by a master's hands. In addition to its vivid appearance, its flavor was beyond description.

Unlike most wealthy upstarts, who only made a show of the riches they had, there had been no obscenity or vulgarity in Ryoma's gestures. Yes, it was a show of overwhelming economic prowess, but there was a purpose to it, and it wasn't limited to just the food. The servants waiting on the guests were all attentive and well trained. It had been a perfect banquet and an exemplary event.

Truth be told, the fine food and drink had washed away much of Viscount McMaster's daily fatigue, and he was still a bit high from the comfort. None of the nobles invited to tonight's party, however, were foolish enough to openly admit that. In fact, Viscount McMaster got the feeling that only nobles smart enough to know better had been invited.

"This is obviously a threat, right?" Diggle asked.

"That probably goes without saying. What matters, father, is how you feel about it," Rosetta answered.

Their eyes met, and it was clear that there was nothing more to be said.

By using moonlight herbs and evening dew mushrooms for the food, he implied he had an abundance of them and, by extension, a supply of nostrums. And he applied endowed thaumaturgy to the cutlery and dinnerware not just to retain the food's warmth and flavor, but to imply he can apply thaumaturgy to items too.

Viscount McMaster had heard the rumors that the Mikoshiba barony's soldiers were all equipped with high-grade equipment, and after tonight, it seemed that was true. With all that in mind, it felt evident that the Kingdom of Rhoadseria would eventually fall into his grasp. Viscount McMaster felt that they had no way of stopping that future from happening.

Viscount McMaster sighed and once again looked out the window, bemoaning his own future and that of his country, but the next moment, something hit his carriage and sent it flying through the air. A sense of weightlessness overcame the viscount, after which the

carriage crashed into the ground with a shaking thud.

“What just...happened...?” Viscount McMaster hissed in pain.

Viscount McMaster’s back had slammed into the carriage’s canopy, knocking the air out of his lungs. It seemed he’d banged his head too.

“Rosetta... Are you all right?”

Though his vision was hazy, Viscount McMaster caught sight of Rosetta lying as still as a corpse. Just then, he heard someone forcefully tear off the carriage’s door. His mind still in a fog, Viscount McMaster reached out for his daughter, who was masquerading as his son. Then everything went black.



Several silhouettes clad in leather armor and brandishing swords approached the overturned carriage. There were roughly twenty of them. Having appeared from within the woods surrounding the highway, they could’ve been bandits, but anyone who saw the way they moved would know they had military training.

“This is the crest of House McMaster, all right...” one of the men said, inspecting the emblem carved on the carriage’s door. “Just like he said, they’ve been pushed against the wall.”

A man standing next to him nodded. “Yes... Damn traitors. They forgot the dignity and pride of the nobility.” His words were steeped in hatred.

To these men, Viscount McMaster was nothing but a filthy traitor, the same as the nobles occupying the other carriages running along this highway. They had an absolute—and, in their eyes, justified—reason to attack Viscount McMaster’s carriage.

The nobles who’d attended Ryoma Mikoshiba’s evening party tonight were all fairly well-known, and taking down any of them would do, as long as they attacked the carriage in a spot isolated enough that no other noble houses would get involved. Plus, in Viscount McMaster’s case, the fact that he had no guards with him made him an easy target. He’d likely decided not to bring any along because Count Salzberg’s estate was close to the capital and because he was confident in his own strength. Unfortunately, in the end, that was what had decided the outcome. His carriage looked like an easy target, and that was all there was to it.

The men knew that embarking on such a poorly planned operation could result in a difficult situation—only the gods could produce complete coincidences, after all—so they had to do all they could to keep the situation in hand.

“Make sure you kill the viscount,” one of the men said. “His being alive would be trouble for us. And make sure you kill the driver and

the effeminate man with him, you hear?"

In the next instant, something whizzed through the darkness, and the man felt something cold stab into his neck. Something hot climbed up his throat, and soon his mouth was filled with the taste of iron. His body went limp.

The shrill sound of a whistle tore through the air. More whistles came blowing from the trees all around them.

"Form a circle!" one of the men called out.

The men instantly realized that they'd just gone from the attackers to the victims.

"Who's there?!" another yelled into the dark, demanding that their attackers show themselves.

He wasn't seriously expecting an answer, but much to his surprise, a woman's voice replied from the woods.

"You ask us 'who's there'? Very cheeky, coming from assassins sent to kill our lord's guests."

As soon as the voice finished speaking, something came raining down on the men, tearing through the wind. The men swung their swords, trying to deflect the attacks approaching them, but they were swatting at the dark. The only sources of light were the moon and stars. Even with martial thaumaturgy reinforcing their sight, they could only see so much.

"Dammit!"

There were screams all around, but based on how the men had immediately formed a circle, it was clear they were very disciplined. Even so, having some combat skill didn't mean they could break through the Igasaki clan's firm encirclement.

Having heard the Igasaki clan's whistles, Lione's detachment approached from another direction. The men were like bugs caught in a spider's web, and before long they'd have nowhere to move.

We'd have it easier if they'd turned tail and fled after our surprise attack, Sakuya thought to herself as she watched the men and sent a hand signal to her subordinates. *Still, the lord's discerning eye is impressive.*

That wasn't to say that Ryoma had known an attack would happen, and he hadn't known Viscount McMaster would be targeted either. He'd just predicted that if an attack were to happen, it would be one of two scenarios. The first was that the enemy would raid Count Salzberg's estate, and the other was that they might go after the party's guests. That was why Ryoma had ordered Lione and her troops to lie in ambush, while he had the Igasaki clan stationed in the mansion. The men had just blindly acted right in the middle of their patrol lines.

And now Viscount McMaster owes us a favor.

Ever since the men walked into the woods, Sakuya and her team had kept a vigilant eye on what they were doing. When they attacked Viscount McMaster's carriage, Sakuya and the others had swooped in right in time to stop them. Of course, if they had wanted to prevent the attack altogether, they could've done so.

But that wouldn't be quite as profitable.

Ryoma was responsible for his guests' lives for as long as they stayed in the mansion, but that didn't apply when they were on their way back home after the party.

And we've learned of Viscount McMaster's personality from Viscount Orglen. He's no ingrate.

Viscount McMaster was as arrogant as Rhoadseria's nobles came, and obstinate at that. He looked less like a noble and more like some kind of bandit leader, and he scorned Ryoma for being an upstart. Nonetheless, as a warrior and a governor, he had decent moral fiber. He was a righteous man who insisted on repaying those to whom he owed debts of gratitude.

Knowing this, Sakuya had allowed the men to attack the carriage, only to swoop in and save the viscount in the nick of time. She did it so the viscount would owe her master a debt he'd be compelled to repay.

Next, we just need to confirm who sent these men.

They already had a fairly good idea of who'd ordered these assassins to act.



But they needed definite proof, so Sakuya decided to provoke them.

“So who are you? From the looks of it, I’d say you’re thieves. Failed mercenaries struggling to earn enough to get by, maybe? Your empty stomachs probably pushed you to seek help from the nobles. If that’s the case, I could ask my master to help you. I’m sure that he, the merciful lord that he is, would be kind enough to share some food with you. Well, it’ll be scraps from tonight’s evening party, but you’ll have to make do with that. I guarantee you it’ll be delicious!”

Sakuya’s words belied what she really thought about their identities, of course. The men looked like mercenaries, yes, but their organization and swordsmanship—they’d cut down the shurikens flying at them in midair—indicated they were as adept as knights. However, revealing that she knew that would get her nowhere. Instead, Sakuya chose to mock their inflated pride and egos, and from the way the men’s expressions changed, her words had had the intended effect.

“Thieves! You call us thieves?!” one of the men shouted back at her, losing his temper. He could tell they were being mocked, and that was exactly what Sakuya was going for.

“Stop it! Don’t be stupid!” another man rebuked him.

Unfortunately for them, the first man’s outburst was enough to distract the group from their enemies lurking in the dark. The next instant, another shower of shurikens rained down on them.

Fools.

The men were experienced and skilled, but their strength wasn’t absolute. A moment’s distraction was all it took to keep them from blocking the Igasaki ninjas’ barrage. The attack took down another two men.

“So? If you’re not thieves, what are you? Surely you won’t say you’re commoners with a grudge against this country’s corrupt nobles. That leaves just one option. You were sent by Queen Lupis Rhoadserians to eliminate any nobles who get in her way. Am I right?”

Sakuya laughed mockingly; hinting at the queen’s involvement was quite a malicious accusation. The men all went quiet.

No response... I guess they won’t fall for that.

The men knew that arguing back or trying to deceive her would be admitting that they were acting on the queen’s orders. If anything, the other party could make the queen’s involvement public through their actions.

But staying quiet is meaningless at this point.

If they really were just bandits or thieves, they would have been

confused at the mention of the queen's name. And if they'd tried to lie, using the queen's authority to get themselves out of this bind, it would've been the same as confessing. The men couldn't afford to answer her question, but at the same time, their silence was just as damning. Sakuya could easily read their hearts.

"Lady Sakuya, they're almost here," one of the Igasaki ninjas behind her whispered into her ear.

"Yes, it's almost time," Sakuya said, picking up on the sound of galloping in the distance.

Let's wrap this up before Lione gets here, then.

These men would not speak either way. The glint in their eyes conveyed that they were all resolved to fight to the bitter end and wouldn't hesitate to take their own lives if need be. Trying to capture them alive would mean more risk than it was worth.

Sakuya raised her right hand, then slowly swung it down as if she were sweeping through the men's lives with an invisible blade.



"Lady Sakuya, what do we do with them?"

Dead bodies littered the ground. They were covered in stick shurikens thrown by twenty Igasaki ninjas, making them look like pincushions, yet some of them still drew breath owing to their leather armor.

Practiced shuriken users could throw stick shurikens with enough force to penetrate a frying pan, but that still wasn't enough to instantly kill a person wearing armor. They'd need to hit their targets in the right spot too. Stick shurikens were more lethal than star-shaped ones, but their penetrating force was limited when it came to clothes or armor. Just two of the men had died instantly from the attack, and that was only because they'd been unlucky enough to get hit in the eye and the throat.

Sakuya didn't mind, though, because the shurikens' blades were laced with poison, making them lethal anyway. The men's bodies soon started to spasm, and red froth leaked from their lips.

Unlike the spy from a while ago, we don't need to keep them alive.

Sakuya had previously eliminated a spy who'd infiltrated House Bergstone, and in order to catch him alive, she'd intentionally used a nonlethal, four-sided star shuriken laced with numbing poison. She had needed to capture the spy alive in order to discover who he was working for, but this time, there was no need to keep these men alive.

Lione appeared, her horse neighing as she reached the scene. Despite being the commander of her unit, she arrived ahead of her force, implying she'd come in a hurry.

"Aye, sorry for runnin' late. Looks like the party's over already,"

Lione said as she jauntily dismounted from her horse. She moved like a feline that had just discovered its prey, invoking her moniker as the Crimson Lioness.

“Don’t let it bother you, Lady Lione,” Sakuya said with a grin. She regarded Lione with the respect and kindness one would have for a colleague. “Eliminating people like this is our specialty.”

Lione lightly shrugged, then looked to the men lying on the ground. “I see... And how are ya gonna handle them after this, by the way?”

Sakuya tilted her head quizzically. “You mean their bodies? Well, leaving them on the highway might be bad, so we were going to move them into the woods. I assume the animals will handle the rest?”

Sakuya had no intention of digging graves for these criminals, but leaving them to rot on the highway could lead to trouble. There might still be carriages leaving Count Salzberg’s estate, and come morning, travelers and merchants would pass through here on the way to the capital. They needed to remove the carriage’s wreckage and the attackers’ bodies before that happened.

To that end, dumping the bodies in the woods was the easiest solution, but Lione shook her head.

“Dumpin’ ’em in the woods isn’t a bad idea, but we may as well put ’em to good use. I say we put a little twist on this situation.”

“A little...twist?” Sakuya parroted, unsure of Lione’s meaning.

Lione gave Sakuya a nod and sent her lieutenant, who was waiting behind her, a hand signal.

“Aye. It’s customary to either hang or behead criminals, ain’t it?”

Lione’s soldiers and the Igasaki ninjas went on to hang the bodies from the trees on the side of the highway. They dangled from the branches like overgrown fruit. Next to them, they placed a sign explaining that these bandits had been sentenced to death by the Mikoshiba barony for attacking Viscount McMaster’s carriage.

“That oughta do it,” Lione said, satisfied.

“I see,” Sakuya muttered. “It’ll serve as a warning to the people passing through, and stand as proof of the lord’s martial might.”

“Yup,” Lione muttered as she watched the men hanging from the branches.

In Ryoma’s world, what they’d done to these men would be viewed as sadistic and even illegal. Not even criminals would be executed without a trial just to set an example. In this world, however, this punishment wasn’t unusual. In fact, even in Ryoma’s world, pirates had been publicly hanged until relatively recently. This world had hardly any police influence, and people’s kindness and good conscience amounted to little, so in order to maintain public order, one needed to demonstrate their military might.

An hour or so before Sakuya killed the bandits...

The meeting with Viscount McMaster ended well. I'll have to thank Viscount Orglen, and Count Zeleph, for introducing me to them.

The evening party had ended, and the guests were all in the process of leaving Count Salzberg's estate. Ryoma, smiling in satisfaction, watched them board their carriages from his office window, then glanced behind him. The room was dim, and the only source of light was a candlestick sitting by the window.

"For the time being, this concludes the first act," Ryoma said.

Laura nodded from the corner of the room. "Everything went as planned. I'm sure they'll be weighing their options carefully. I think welcoming them with things they couldn't ever afford was a good way of applying pressure. Bringing out that fish dish was especially effective. Just that forced the nobles to acknowledge your wealth, whether they liked it or not."

"Well, yes. After all, actively threatening them would've had the opposite effect on some people. General Albrecht's fate made that clear."

Due to a vicious plot, one woman's husband and beloved daughter had been slain in the most terrible way, despite the fact that she'd climbed to the rank of general through sheer talent and effort. It had warped her heart from that of a proud, glorious goddess of war to that of a vengeful demon. Her rage led her to not only kill General Albrecht for being behind that plot, but to take the lives of his family in retribution as well.

Direct threats had both advantages and disadvantages. Cornered people might strike in retaliation regardless of their odds, much like a mouse biting the cat hunting it. Ryoma was aware of this, so he'd prepared a dish with ingredients imported from afar for the express purpose of displaying his wealth even through the food he served to his guests.

Threatening one's family can be effective, assuming you don't care about morality or how it would warp people's opinion of you once word of your actions got out. But if you use that card poorly, it could prove fatal not just to yourself, but to your own family too.

That was Ryoma's impression, anyway, but he couldn't say that to Helena, who'd lost her family to such malice. A careless remark like that could drive a wedge between them. Still, going after another's family wasn't a bad play if one merely wanted to eliminate someone in their way. The fact that it was such an immoral and unreasonable act was exactly what granted it coercive power. If nothing else, Ryoma wasn't going to deny it could be a useful tool in certain situations.

In fiction, the villain holding the hero's family hostage was a hackneyed trope, but just because it was cliché didn't mean it was ineffective. It was overused precisely because it was such an effective motivator.

Of course, if Ryoma could avoid stooping to such means, he would, but if it was necessary, he wouldn't hesitate to go that far. Being a leader meant he couldn't afford to let his emotions influence his decisions.

But even an effective play needs to be used wisely, or else it will be completely meaningless.

The deceased Hodram Albrecht's actions could only be summed up as sloppy. Yes, putting Helena's husband's head on display and abducting her daughter to make Helena retire from her position as general had garnered the outcome he desired. The moral implications of selling her daughter to a slaver who drove the girl to her death were irrelevant.

At the time, Hodram Albrecht had no way of becoming Rhoadseria's general. Helena was superior to him.

The question was why General Albrecht pursued that position and whether his actions were appropriate.

"You call General Albrecht foolish, master... Do you say that because he kept Helena alive?" Laura asked.

"Simply put, yes," Ryoma answered.

Ryoma didn't think General Albrecht was a likable person, to say the least. He would even go so far as to call him the scum of the earth, but that was just his take on the general. In terms of Albrecht's capability, there wasn't much of a difference between him and Helena. After he drove her to retirement, he'd maintained his rank of general for over a decade, controlling Rhoadseria's military affairs and fulfilling his duties.

His shameful defeat in the civil war could be attributed to his terrible reputation. Years of tyranny had earned him the antipathy of those around him. That wasn't to say he'd been an inept leader, but the fact that he'd served as general well enough didn't necessarily mean he was worthy of the role. General Albrecht didn't have the qualities required of a commander, and it was obvious to everyone around him.

Besides, there wasn't much of an age gap between Hodram and Helena. He would've started to consider retirement at roughly the same time she would have, meaning the chance of him being her successor and taking over the role of general after her was highly unlikely. He had to give up on inheriting the role through legitimate means. His only option was to remove Helena from the equation, and going after her family was one way of doing it. Nonetheless, even

though he'd been willing to dirty his hands—even if indirectly—to get what he wanted, in the end, Albrecht failed to finish the job.

“If he was willing to kill Helena’s husband and daughter, he should have found a chance to eliminate her too,” Ryoma said.

Therein lay the general’s biggest mistake in Ryoma’s eyes. Albrecht had left behind someone with a grudge against him. If he’d wanted to use Helena’s family to get her to retire, he didn’t have to physically attack them. He could have extorted Helena, sowing in her the fear that those closest to her might be taken away if she didn’t do as he said. In other words, in taking away all she held dear, he left her with nothing to lose and no other emotions but anger and hatred for him. Killing Helena’s husband had made his threat credible, but all it really did was make Helena resent him.

It was a risky choice. Abducting her daughter on top of that, only to never return her was more than just the worst possible thing he could’ve done. It ventured into utter stupidity. Moreover, given Hodram’s relationship with Helena at the time, he would’ve been the most obvious suspect, even if there was no evidence pointing directly to him. It was apparent that Helena would eventually bare her fangs at him.

In the end, the slaver who was behind the abduction revealed his involvement anyway.

“You think General Albrecht didn’t understand that?” Laura asked.

Ryoma shook his head. “I can only speculate now, but I think he did it less as a threat to extort the position from Helena, and more out of envy for the fact a commoner like her became general. He didn’t kill Helena, but it wasn’t because he feared her fame and popularity. He just wanted to see her wallow in sorrow over her loss, and to gloat. At least, that’s what I think.”

Physically eliminating Helena was risky in its own way, but in Ryoma’s opinion, Albrecht hadn’t so much feared that risk. His dark obsession had simply kept him from killing the woman he hated. He’d wanted to see her squirm.

He prioritized his personal feelings.

Resorting to coercion to have his way... Nothing could be more foolish.

“The conditions this time are pretty different from Albrecht’s, but we’re dealing with authority figures who have a great deal of pride, so I had to be careful about my choices. Luckily, the evening party was a success.”

The nobles scorned Ryoma for being an upstart, but after receiving such amiable and generous treatment during his evening party, it was likely their disgruntlement would fade a little.

So far, so good. That just leaves...

The evening party had been a resounding success, but the day wasn't over yet.

"It's late. We shouldn't keep him waiting. Laura, call Viscount Gelhart over."

Laura nodded and left the room. The moon peeked out from the clouds, casting its pale glow into the room like a light guiding Ryoma on his correct path.



Furio Gelhart sighed. By now, he'd lost count of how many times he'd sighed that day. The time was late, and he'd already taken off the wig and fake beard he'd worn to disguise himself. He'd also changed out of his clothes, which were quite outdated as far as fashion went. Anyone looking at him now wouldn't guess that he was, in fact, a shabby, impoverished noble.

Viscount Gelhart was currently in Count Salzberg's estate—or rather, former estate—in the woods outside of Pireas.

I watched the party from the sidelines, but it was well managed. I'm sure some of the servants have worked in this estate since Count Salzberg's days, but they didn't seem to have any doubts or qualms. Ryoma's having killed the count didn't seem to influence the way they acted.

Viscount Gelhart sighed once more. As head of the nobles' faction, it was far too dangerous for him to attend Baron Mikoshiba's evening party openly, but it had proved well worth the risk to go covertly. If nothing else, he got to witness the Mikoshiba barony's demonstration of financial and military might.

The party was a masterpiece, and after he showed off like that, any noble will have to acknowledge the Mikoshiba barony's overwhelming economic superiority.

Ryoma had served them food of such quality that it had made even the nobles, with their refined palate, race to the table for more. These were the same nobles who'd gossiped in the palace's halls just a few days ago about the terrible food the upstart baron would probably serve at his party.

I can't blame them. Just looking at that food made me salivate too.

Viscount Gelhart had attended the party in disguise so as not to draw attention to himself. He simply hung back in one of the hall's corners, looking on without being noticed. Thanks to that, he'd hardly tasted the food himself. He'd only sipped a bit of the wine and nibbled at a few of the dishes a considerate waitress had brought him, but that little indulgence was more than enough. The aroma of the food and drinks on the table had given him an idea of their high quality, and once he actually tasted them, he'd realized how talented the chef was.

From what Viscount Gelhart could tell, the food and drinks were

all first class. Additionally, the food had been garnished with generous amounts of spices—spices probably worth their weight in gold—and he could only guess they'd been imported from other continents. That alone elevated this party to the same standard as the ones he'd held during the height of his power.

What's more, the dishes were novel and original. Ryoma had served common culinary dishes like roasts and soups, but the nobles were all drawn to the other dishes next to them. For example, there were deep-fried foods, which were rare due to how much oil they consumed, as well as other unique dishes that demonstrated the chef's skills. One extremely impressive moment was when a live fish was brought into the hall, where it was carved up and mixed with oil and spices.

Such dishes were uncommon in this world, since cooking mostly amounted to heating things, save for fruit, over a fire. Viscount Gelhart had heard that in some of the continent's coastal regions it was customary to eat raw food, but this was his first time tasting anything of the sort. Still, the performance of it all was what had really tied the whole event together.

It's hard to believe he had several fish of that size.

A bass large enough to shock even the nobles was brought out, only to be dropped on the floor. The nobles were disappointed at first, but their dismay turned to surprise when another fish of the same size was brought out immediately after. Ryoma had apologized for his waitress's clumsiness, but Viscount Gelhart was almost sure the whole thing had been planned out ahead of time.

Maybe he even planned on people figuring out it was all a performance, to demonstrate he can get as many fish of that size as he wishes.

At that point, Viscount Gelhart shook his head.

His domain in the Wortenia Peninsula is surrounded by the sea, and since he built a port to trade with the neighboring countries, he has more chances to get seafood compared to people like us who have inland domains. But that doesn't mean...

Pireas, Rhoadseria's capital, was far from the coast, so most of its cuisine was based on meat and carbohydrates, like potatoes. Fish dishes weren't unheard of, but they were limited to freshwater fish and shrimp caught in rivers. Some gourmets insisted on eating fish caught from the sea, but since it took days to carry fish to Rhoadseria, the trip impacted their freshness. It was enough of a problem that people joked about nobles dying every year because they ate something bad.

Be that as it may, all the food served today had been fresh, and based on how the nobles eagerly ate it, nothing had smelled rotten.

That wasn't the only issue, though.

The dishes and bowls they gave people... They were made of ceramic fashioned by a craftsman. They were fine too, good enough to be used in my own household. But that's not the problem.

Food degraded as time went by, same as how hot soup became stale when left to cool, but that wasn't an issue when the containers had endowed thaumaturgy applied to them. When a practitioner fed them prana, they would keep warm food warm or, alternatively, keep cold dishes from melting. However, this was easier said than done.

Endowed thaumaturgy users were rare, and in addition to the knowledge required to use it, carving complex thaumaturgical seals required time and labor. Since endowed thaumaturgy demanded this technical knowledge, mastering it was even more difficult than mastering martial and verbal thaumaturgy. Not to mention, most endowed thaumaturgy users kept to themselves. They mostly passed down their art to their families, and since endowed thaumaturgy was typically used on armor and gear, the seals were usually for hardening or weight reduction. One exception was the seal of coercion used on slaves. Either way, endowed thaumaturgy users were few and far between.

Those plates were set to activate even without their holders filling them with prana. They're probably very efficient when it comes to prana consumption. Whoever made those seals is very skilled.

Endowed thaumaturgy was a type of thaumaturgy that consumed the user's prana to activate a certain effect, and it was primarily used by wielders who could control the flow of prana in their bodies. Ordinary humans had prana as well, but their reserves weren't enough to activate a thaumaturgical seal. Yet, somehow, the party's tableware had ignored that logic. The glass of wine Viscount Gelhart held had been freezing cold, and it had remained that way even after he drank all the contents.

I don't know how he managed it, but he must have used a great deal of funds and connections to get enough tableware to accommodate nearly two hundred guests.

Viscount Gelhart realized what that must have meant and sank into thought. He couldn't tell how long he'd spent pondering it all, but he eventually heard a gentle knock on the door.

"My master requests that you come to his office," a woman's voice called from behind the door.

Viscount Gelhart nodded and got to his feet. He then picked up the glass on the table in front of him and gulped its contents down to rouse himself.

A young woman in maid's clothing and striking silver hair led him to a room. There, Furio Gelhart exchanged words with Ryoma

Mikoshiba for the first time. Perhaps deciding that glossing over things would be meaningless at this point, the viscount spoke honestly. When Ryoma asked him what he thought the fate of this country would be, he didn't hold back.

"You think it's fated to fall to ruin," Ryoma stated. "A very radical answer."

"Yes. Even though I know that the changing times brought this upon us, seeing this five-hundred-year-old kingdom perish weighs on my heart. Especially since House Gelhart draws on the blood of the first king's younger brother..."



If Ryoma's asking that question bordered on disloyalty, then Viscount Gelhart's answer went past that and into outright treason. Nevertheless, there was no doubt or sorrow on the viscount's face, and given the meaning of his words, that was very unusual. This proved he'd accepted the facts for what they were.

Viscount Gelhart took a sip of water from the glass he was holding and placed it on the table before carrying on.

"At this point, it goes without saying, but Her Majesty Lupis Rhoadserians's regime is in its dying days. The queen's retainer, Meltina Lecter, is scrambling to keep the country from tearing at the seams, but the way things are now, there isn't much she can do. She tries to hold the castle's bureaucrats firmly under her thumb, but honestly speaking, she's just barely keeping the country alive."

Viscount Gelhart smiled at Ryoma.

"Especially now that she's made an enemy of the Devil of Heraklion. Surely you realize why she didn't interfere with your war against Count Salzberg, yes?"

The viscount's smile harbored no malice or scorn. If anything, he seemed full of expectation and hope to see how one could survive this crisis.

Viscount Gelhart understood the country's current state more than Ryoma had expected him to. He'd been demoted from duke to viscount and removed from his stronghold, Heraklion, in southern Rhoadseria to a rural area near the border, but despite that, he seemed to know a great deal about the situation within the palace. It made sense; he did control the nobles' faction for years.

For a time, the nobles' faction's power had considerably diminished, but it seemed they really were making a comeback.

Although Viscount Gelhart's domain and assets were limited now, it seemed the connections he'd formed over the years couldn't be severed. The fact that he could discern Lupis's plots within the palace despite being confined to a domain so far from the capital proved that.

At the same time, Viscount Gelhart was confident that the Devil of Heraklion would not sit idly by and wait for the queen to end his life.

"The Devil of Heraklion," Ryoma muttered. "I know I earned it, but talk about a negatively exaggerated name."

"Yet that name of yours cost me the civil war," Viscount Gelhart noted. "And you can be away from your newly won territory without fear of rebellion due to that name too. The people in your domain know of your might and wouldn't dare revolt against you. Of course, part of it is because you're generous with your wealth, but if I had to say, you account for your infamy in all your plans. Or am I wrong?"

Ryoma answered Viscount Gelhart's question with only a bitter

smile. He knew well enough that the viscount was right.

If God was the absolute justice, then a demon or a devil stood in opposition to Him, becoming the eternal villain and antagonist. That belief remained just as true in this world. Those with such names were believed to call forth calamities, such as plagues and earthquakes.

The words “demon” and “devil” had commanding and compelling implications to them. In Japan’s Warring States period, Katsuei Shibata, one of the conqueror Nobunaga Oda’s vassals, was known as the Demon Shibata for his great deeds during his service. Likewise, Shimazu Yoshihiro was called Shimazu the Demon for the impressive way he broke through enemy lines in the battle of Sekigahara, during which his escape decided the way the battle ended.

Calling someone a demon wasn’t quite the same as calling them a devil, and from a Japanese point of view, “devil” implied more strength and intellect. Plus, few people in the modern world ever received this kind of appellation. In modern Japan, only athletes and people in very limited industries ever got those titles. It was a unique experience for Ryoma, to be sure.

In that regard, he was allowed to take a modicum of pride in his title. However, Ryoma had been an ordinary high schooler when he was summoned to this world, so from where he was standing, the title was more embarrassing than anything else. This was just his perspective as a Japanese teenager, though. In this world, where technology and science were underdeveloped, things were different. The power of thaumaturgy influenced all fields of reality, and belief in gods and mystical powers was still prevalent. Such titles weren’t bestowed lightly.

The cover of a certain book surfaced in Ryoma’s mind. Since there was no printing technology in this world, books were precious and expensive, but this book was even more valuable than that. Simone Christof had delivered it to Sirius on Ryoma’s orders.

The book described how what began as a small indigenous sect morphed into the largest religious group in the western continent. Through its dogma that mankind was created by the God of Light and was the true ruler of the world, the religion grew far and wide. The book detailed the aftermath of the war that broke out between that religion and the demi-human clans.

A devil hunt...

Around four hundred years ago, whenever famine or calamity struck the western continent, people would seek out the devil they believed had caused those hardships. At first, they’d blamed the demi-humans, but after they were expelled from the land, the humans had sought new enemies. Under the name of purification and salvation, they’d mark their fellow man as devils and hunt them down.

No matter what world you're in, people still believe gods are good and devils are an evil that needs to be eradicated. It's like the witch hunts in Europe.

From what Ryoma had read of the book, no actual devils existed. The book only contained a record of people who'd been dubbed as such and put to death for it. Other books he'd bought besides this one told the same story. What's more, most of the people labeled as devils were those who'd criticized the Church of Meneos. They were mostly refugees and tenant farmers who'd been exploited out of their land by former governors—in other words, the lowest of the lower classes. To some people, they were merely pests.

If they had any demonic powers to begin with, like the book claimed they did, they wouldn't have undergone a trial and allowed themselves to be executed, would they?

Besides, would monsters who could manipulate the weather and summon plagues even get caught? Even if they were captured, they certainly wouldn't quietly await their verdict. They would rampage and use their supernatural powers to avoid death or, at least, take their captors down with them.

After all, the Church of Meneos painted them as devils hellbent on tormenting mankind with their destructive powers. In truth, all the church did was create an excuse to get rid of undesirable people and, at best, offer sacrifices to placate the families struck by natural disasters. It was similar to the witch trials that took place in Europe, but in that case, it was now a matter of historic record. Thankfully, such hunts were a relic of the past and didn't occur any longer.

I don't know if the Church of Meneos adopted this practice on its own to purge its ranks of dissidents, or if the idea came from otherworlders who warped the faith, but...

The problem was that the memories of this gruesome custom had been passed down the generations, and it still existed in the western continent's collective memory. The people still held very extreme beliefs about the words “devil” and “witch.”

Ryoma's achievements during the expedition to Xarooda—repelling the O'tormean invasion with a small force—had changed the Rhoadserian people's opinion of him to a national hero, but it seemed his good reputation had yet to fully eclipse his infamy. Unlike Helena's title of Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War, and Lione's sobriquet “The Crimson Lioness,” his epithet made him both feared and loathed.

I did it because I was driven into a corner, but I still killed that many people. I had to be prepared for some backlash.

During the civil war, when he built a bridgehead for his army to cross the River Thebes, Ryoma drowned an attack force led by Kael

Iruna as they attempted to march on his encampment. On top of that, in defiance of Rhoadseria's conventions of warfare, he'd slaughtered any surviving enemy soldiers rather than take them captive. That much was undeniable fact.

Furthermore, Ryoma had spread rumors of what he did to the villages around Heraklion so that the commoners would rebel against the conscription, thereby causing the nobles' faction to fracture. That was all part of Ryoma's tactic, and he'd personally told his mercenaries to exaggerate the rumors about him. With all that in mind, it was Ryoma's own fault that he had such a bad reputation.

Plus, Viscount Gelhart is right.

Being infamous meant people feared you, and terror translated to deterrence. Ryoma didn't know what being called a devil meant on this continent, but he'd made good use of the title all the same—and Viscount Gelhart had realized that.

May as well commit to the title at this point. In for a penny, in for a pound...

Honestly speaking, joining forces with Furio Gelhart was a huge gamble. It would mean joining hands with a past opponent of his, and it could mean making enemies of Count Bergstone's faction, which had just joined the fold. But as things stood, Ryoma couldn't realistically subjugate the Kingdom of Rhoadseria with sheer military might, so he needed to use any play possible to do so.

Ryoma opened his mouth to ask Viscount Gelhart one last thing, but at that moment, he heard the shrill sound of a whistle.

That whistle... It can't be!

That was the signal that the Igasaki clan had discovered the enemy. Viscount Gelhart appeared to have heard it too, because he glanced suspiciously at the window.

"My...whistling at this time of night?"

The mansion gradually came to life. Those who knew the meaning of the sound hurried to the armory to prepare for an attack. The nobles who still hadn't departed sensed danger and moved about cautiously. They still didn't know if the Mikoshiba barony was their ally or their enemy, and their entourages couldn't afford to expose them to danger.

"Could you wait for a bit?" Ryoma called to Viscount Gelhart, who was frowning anxiously, and quickly made for the door. But before Ryoma could touch the doorknob, the door swung open, revealing Sara on the other side.

"My apologies for interrupting your meeting," she said.

Normally, Sara's actions would have been highly inappropriate. Opening the door to her master's office without his permission would have been unthinkable, but it was apparent that this situation was an

exception.

“Well, what happened?” Ryoma asked.

“I don’t know for sure yet, but the Igasaki clan reports that Viscount McMaster’s carriage was attacked by a group of what seems to be bandits. Sakuya’s currently fighting the attackers and stalling them, and Lione’s unit should be arriving on the scene soon.”

Ryoma had instructed them to blow the whistles in specific rhythms as a means of communication, not unlike morse code. As limited a method as it was, it bore fruit at this juncture.

I was right to prepare things ahead of time. But if there was an attack, who ordered it?

There were a few possible suspects, but the most likely ones were Queen Lupis and her loyal retainer, Meltina Lecter. That said, something about Sakuya’s report concerning the so-called bandits struck Ryoma as odd.

“The way you worded it...makes it seem like the attackers were few in number,” he said.

“The report says it was about twenty or so men,” Sara replied.

Ryoma fell silent.

Twenty? Why so few? If they wanted to kill someone, they’d send a military unit. And the fact that they picked Viscount McMaster feels off too. Why him?

If they’d wanted to attack nobles on the way back from Ryoma’s evening party, they’d have sent a hundred men to do it. Twenty men was enough to attack a single carriage, but in doing so while it was on the way back from a party, they ran the risk of encountering other carriages besides their target. Plus, they’d need to account for the party’s security too. Twenty was plenty to take down their target, but for any target larger than that, it was too much of a gamble. If they were unlucky, the other nobles would notice the attack and gather there, cutting off their avenue of escape.

The way they’re going about it is too messy. I can’t figure out what their aim is.

After a few seconds of silence, Viscount Gelhart gingerly said, “Baron Mikoshiba, if you don’t mind, I’d like to take my leave... May I?”

Ryoma glanced at him. The viscount’s face was contorted in terror. As a man of influence, he probably felt his life was at risk.

I can understand his wanting to scurry home, what with the way things are now, but...

But with the situation being as uncertain as it was, Ryoma wasn’t sure if it was wise to act recklessly. He didn’t want to jump to conclusions either way.

As these thoughts troubled him, Ryoma heard a tumult on the

lower levels. He could hear people arguing. One of the voices sounded like Laura's, but she was too far away for him to make out what she was saying, so he used martial thaumaturgy to reinforce his sense of hearing.

Who else is there?

Listening in, he could tell that the other voice belonged to one of the knights on guard, who'd hurried up from the first floor. Then, the next instant, a man's angered shout shook the walls of Count Salzberg's estate.

"Impossible! What are you saying?! Our duty is to protect our lord, not help you with your stupid scheming!"

"Oh, that voice... It seems my guards have noticed the disturbance and have come for me," Viscount Gelhart explained. "Lord Mikoshiba, if you could be kind enough to let them through?"

It seemed the viscount had also reinforced his hearing and had recognized the knight's voice. Ryoma turned to Sara, who awaited his orders, and nodded. Sara nodded back and swiftly turned around.

A few seconds later, the shouting gradually died down until it was completely inaudible. Ryoma kept his eyes fixed on the staircase at the end of the corridor, and before long, five knights appeared, accompanied by the Malfist sisters. The twins led the knights down the corridor toward Ryoma's office.

The moment Ryoma saw the knights, he felt an inexplicable chill run down his body.

What?

At first glance, nothing stood out about the knights. They wore full plate armor—metal clanked with every step they took—but since they weren't wearing helmets, Ryoma could see their faces clearly. These were the guards Viscount Gelhart had come with to this estate. That much was obvious from Viscount Gelhart's expression as well.

The viscount stood in front of Ryoma, greeting his guards, yet Ryoma couldn't shake the feeling that something was off—an impression that was growing stronger with each passing second. However, since there wasn't anything visibly wrong with them, he couldn't put his finger on it. A murky emotion settled in his heart.

When the knights stepped closer, about twenty meters away from him, Ryoma suddenly realized what was tugging at his mind.

Right, their cloaks!

From what Ryoma remembered, the knights had been wearing white cloaks when they entered this estate, but they weren't wearing them right now. That wasn't all that suspicious in and of itself. They were guards, but they didn't need to wear their cloaks when guarding their lord indoors. Still, there was one problem with this. These knights had been guarding the vicinity of the mansion and had never

entered the building until now. If they'd hurried over to ensure their lord's safety, surely they wouldn't have the presence of mind to politely leave their cloaks with the servants. Even if one or two of them had remembered to do so, not all five of them would be composed enough to do it.

Ryoma's caution spiked at once, and perhaps noticing this, the knights gradually sped up down the corridor. They passed the Malfist sisters and bolted toward Ryoma. Though their plate armor weighed dozens of kilograms, they moved as fast as the wind. They had evidently reinforced their bodies with martial thaumaturgy.

Seeing their beloved master's expression coupled with the knights' odd behavior, the Malfist twins realized something was wrong and quickly drew the daggers they hid in their maid uniforms. They then activated their fifth chakra, the Vishuddha chakra located in their throats. Their chakras rotated, filling their bodies with superhuman strength, but by the time they finished, the knights had already closed the distance to Ryoma.

Two of the five knights turned to face the sisters, intending to stall them, while the other three closed in on their target. When they were only five meters away from Ryoma, the three knights drew their swords from their sheaths.

These guys!

As spacious as the corridors were in Count Salzberg's estate, they were by no means wide enough for Ryoma to effectively engage three knights at once. The three knights knew this perfectly well too.

The one in the lead is trying to distract me so that the other two can surround and finish me off. It's a lethal formation, sacrificing one of them to take me down.

If Ryoma were to incorrectly dodge their first attack, the second and third knights would slash at him from behind, but retreating back into his office wasn't a good idea either. Viscount Gelhart, who was standing motionlessly behind him, hadn't grasped the situation yet. If his noble house had been a house of warriors, he'd have had the experience to know what was going on, but Viscount Gelhart was originally a duke at the peak of Rhoadseria's noble society. He didn't have any combat experience. He'd learned martial thaumaturgy as part of his noble education, and he'd indulged in swordplay as a high-society hobby, but he'd never fought with his life on the line. While Ryoma could fall back and retreat, Viscount Gelhart would stay rooted in place, and the attackers would certainly kill him.

I can't get to Kikoku...

Ryoma had put his sword away for his meeting with Viscount Gelhart. Bringing a cursed sword to a discussion like that would have made quite the negative impression, after all.

The knights closing in on Ryoma counted on him being unarmed. The knight leading the charge swung his sword overhead, his face twisted into a confident smile. He was sure of his victory.

No choice, I guess... It's a shame, given how much this shirt cost...

Ryoma tore off one of his shirt buttons and pressed it between his right hand's middle and index fingers. He then swung his right hand forward over his right breast, which produced a snapping sound. In less than a second, the knight charging straight at him let out an animalistic howl that echoed through the corridor.

Ryoma had utilized the art of the arhat coin. Like its name implied, it was a form of Chinese martial arts that used coins hidden on one's person as weapons. Basically, it was a throwing technique using a copper coin with a sharpened outer edge.

Ryoma had done the same with his shirt button. It wasn't a bronze coin, so normally it wouldn't be lethal, but a master martial artist like Ryoma, with his body reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, could propel the button at an opponent's weak spots, such as the eyes.

The knight covered his face with his hand and tumbled to the floor. No one immediately understood what had happened. It looked to them like Ryoma had only swung his arm, so the knight's reaction was startling. Everyone froze, unsure of how to process the situation.

That pause was exactly what Ryoma was hoping for. He used it to close the distance with the remaining knights.

First, I need to take out the knight on the left!

This was an all-or-nothing gamble, but considering that he was unarmed, he didn't have any other options. Nonetheless, Ryoma was confident in his martial prowess.

Seeing Ryoma approaching, the knight on the left reflexively brandished his sword and swung it down, not knowing that he'd just made the worst possible choice. Sliding into the knight's flank, Ryoma slammed his fist at his mentolabial sulcus—the spot between the chin and lower lip. It wasn't a straight punch, but what was called a single-finger punch—a strike with the index finger's second joint jutting out.

While the knight was dazed from the hit, Ryoma swiftly circled behind him. He grabbed the knight by the head, twisted it so as to crush his cervical vertebrae, and broke his neck with a snap.

Ryoma then lunged at the last remaining knight, who'd yet to grasp the situation. The knight thrust his sword out with all his might, having realized instinctively that his life depended on this. However, for all the knight's desperation, his attack was nothing more than futile resistance.

To Ryoma, a thrust without any range, buildup, or feints—and with the soldier out of position, at that—looked the same as his opponent standing still. He easily dodged the blade aimed at his throat

by casually craning his neck, closed the distance, and thrust the heel of his palm up against the knight's jaw.

It knocked the knight down, and the back of his head slammed against the floor. The force of Ryoma's strike, reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, as well as the knight's own body weight, focused on the back of his head and crushed his skull. With what sounded like an egg cracking, a bloody flower bloomed across the floor.

"Master Ryoma, are you all right?!"

"You've got blood on your face! Are you hurt?!"

The Malfist twins hurried over to Ryoma, having defeated their own targets. Ryoma held up a hand to silence them.

"I'm okay. This is just blood splatter. No point wiping it off now either. I'll just get dirty again in a second."

Ryoma turned to the knight who was still alive and cradling his face on the floor. He then kicked the back of the knight's head, and with a crunching sound, a dull tremor ran through the estate. The knight turned limp.

Looking down at him, Ryoma clicked his tongue. "Uninvited guests, eh? Cleaning the blood out of these clothes is gonna be difficult. I'm in for one hell of a scolding from Lady Yulia..."

Five corpses littered the corridor, but the two soldiers the Malfist sisters had disposed of were relatively clean kills. The ones Ryoma had killed, on the other hand, were in a markedly more gruesome state. The one that had his neck snapped was relatively clean, but the other two had cracked skulls—quite the grisly sight. Ryoma was also covered in blood.

"Lord Mikoshiba..." Viscount Gelhart muttered.

He was stunned speechless by this sudden sequence of events. In fact, it seemed he didn't fully understand what had just happened.

"I think we're going to have to hold a very different conversation now," Ryoma said brightly. "Right, Viscount Gelhart?"

Ryoma smiled at him, his face still streaked in blood, like he'd done nothing more than stomp out an insect. Seeing Ryoma like this, Viscount Gelhart was seized with inexplicable terror.

He's like...a devil in human form...

He felt something cold slide down his back, and at that moment, Viscount Gelhart realized that he couldn't defeat the man standing before him. At the same time, the path he should take as a Rhoadserian noble became clear to him.

Dark clouds began to cover the moon hanging outside the window, just like the clouds of anxiety enveloping Viscount Gelhart's heart.

Epilogue

A few days had passed since Ryoma's secret meeting with Viscount Gelhart. With the evening party concluded, Ryoma and his group had moved to Count Salzberg's other estate in the capital's noble district.

It was just past noon, and Ryoma was in the office located on the second floor of the estate. Looking at the group gathered there, he announced, "Tomorrow's the day."

Everyone nodded; they all knew what he meant. Standing in the room were the Malfist sisters, Laura and Sara; Lione; Gennou Igasaki; and Gennou's granddaughter, Sakuya. Also in attendance were Yulia Salzberg, heir to her deceased husband's title; Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria, Count Salzberg's Twin Blades; the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph, the newest additions to this council; and Helena Steiner.

The only members absent were Boltz, who was charged with the development and security of the Mikoshiba barony and the city of Sirius; Simone Christof, who was engaged in trade and mercantile activities to secure the barony's financial stability; and the other elders of the Igasaki clan, who were speedily building an intelligence network across Ryoma's newly acquired domain in northern Rhoadseria.

Some of the people present had officially become Ryoma's retainers, while others were acting as cooperators, but everyone gathered had one thing in common: they all supported Ryoma Mikoshiba in their respective field, be it military, internal affairs, or intelligence. Being fully aware of their roles, they knew perfectly well what was going to happen the next day. Everything they'd done in the capital since arriving in Pireas was to prepare for tomorrow.

I'd have liked Nelcius to be here too, but given his position, that's not possible. The problem is...

Ryoma glanced at Dilphina and the five women working under her, who were standing against the wall. Armor covered their bodies, and helmets hid their faces. Nelcius was a powerful ally of the Mikoshiba barony and had a right to attend this council, but due to his position as the chief representing the demi-humans living in Wortenia, he couldn't easily leave the peninsula.

Things would have been different if the demi-humans all cooperated with Ryoma, but there were still those who remained

prejudiced against mankind. Nelcius spent his days sharing the goods from Sirius with those naysayers in an attempt to sway their opinion, so he'd sent these women led by Dilphina to serve as representatives of the demi-human population in his place, though they all came from Nelcius's dark elf clan.

Nevertheless, the fact remained that Nelcius was trading with Ryoma, so since he couldn't leave Wortenia, he sent them instead, granting them his rights and authority by proxy. They were essentially like goodwill ambassadors or diplomatic representatives, and as their partner of sorts, neither Ryoma nor his associates could treat them poorly. Being picked for this task was a great honor, and they had considerable authority in their respective field and the right to speak their mind.

Yet, in the end, they didn't have a say in Ryoma's decisions. This had placed these six demi-human women in a peculiar position, so it had been decided that they would work under the Malfist sisters as Ryoma's personal guard.

And what an extravagant personal guard they made. As daughter to the Mad Demon Nelcius, Dilphina's combat prowess matched that of the Twin Blades, Robert and Signus. During the campaign in Xarooda, Dilphina had served in Lione's unit and proved her might. She had single-handedly raided an O'ltormean supply unit and slew their captain.

The five warriors serving as her subordinates were all handpicked by Nelcius from his warrior clan. Their skills were guaranteed. If this were a chess game, they would be the knights and rooks.

That wasn't to say that there were no problems whatsoever. Their skills were without question, but the fact that they were demi-humans limited how much Ryoma could utilize them. He didn't regard them with any prejudice, of course. Neither did Boltz, who was running affairs in Sirius; Simone, who was in charge of trade operations; nor Simone's representative, Alejandro, who was dispatched as her contact person. But this only applied to relations within Ryoma's sphere of influence and, more to the point, the Wortenia Peninsula and its center of operations in Sirius.

True, Rhoadseria lay in the continent's east, where the Church of Meneos didn't have as much influence, but the dark elves still couldn't act out in the open. If humans of this country were to see them, it would cause a panic, so Ryoma had avoided revealing Dilphina and her unit to the people, even after winning the war with Count Salzberg and occupying Epirus.

Ryoma did intend to eventually have them interact with the commoners around Epirus, little by little, but he couldn't do it right away. Carelessness could lead to another holy war. If that applied to

northern Rhoadseria, which was under Ryoma's influence, it stood to reason that Pireas would be even less accommodating of the demi-humans.

In addition, since the House of Lords had summoned Ryoma to discuss his war with Count Salzberg, revealing his involvement with the demi-humans would just give his opponents a weakness to exploit. In that regard, bringing Dilphina's unit with him to the capital was a mistake.

Still, these women were handpicked by Nelcius to improve relations with Ryoma. If Ryoma had left them in Sirius while he went to Pireas, it would not have gone over well. It would have damaged their friendly relations with the demi-humans. That was why Ryoma had assigned them as his guards after they'd finished delivering supplies for the evening party.

From their perspective, I'm sure that's obvious.

From where Nelcius was standing, it made sense he'd want to improve his unstable position. Plus, Dilphina's Black Serpent unit was made up of women so beautiful they were considered living gemstones. The fact that Nelcius had deployed only women warriors to aid Ryoma made his intent quite clear.

As that thought crossed his mind, Ryoma suddenly felt the Malfist sisters, who were sitting on either side of him, look directly at him. He glanced around while trying to look as unassuming as possible and spotted Laura and Sara grinning. They didn't look particularly displeased, and, on the surface, their smiles were cheerful, but something was definitely different about their expressions. If Ryoma had to say, their stares had a menacing pressure to them. He wasn't so dense as to miss the nuance of their smiles either. It had irked the twins that his eyes had wandered over to Dilphina and her group.

On the bright side, their emotions weren't from bigoted hatred for another race. Instead, it was envious enmity a woman held for another woman.

Jeez... How are women so intuitive?

All of these women, including Dilphina, were both warriors and beautiful dark elves. Unlike normal elves, dark elves were well-endowed, looking less demure and more alluring. This was something the Malfist sisters lacked.

Those two seem to view them as rivals. Heck, it's almost hostility. But why? They're plenty pretty.

Ryoma was honestly baffled. Laura and Sara were beautiful girls, and few women could match their looks. If one searched this entire world, one could possibly find women who outmatched them, but still, their appearances were far above average.

I guess Dilphina and her group have the twins beat when it comes to

the size of their busts and asses. They have this mature charm going for them.

A woman's appeal wasn't dictated strictly by her proportions. Her facial features, the overall balance of her body compared to her height, her personality... All of those factors made a woman attractive.

To begin with, a man expected something different from his lover or mistress than his spouse. The same could be said of a woman's expectations for a man. Many variables affected a person's appeal to the opposite sex, like their goals for the relationship, their position in life, and their age.

To Ryoma, the twins were already well-endowed. Given their height and weight, they looked perfect as they were. Dilphina and her group were voluptuous, to be sure, but Ryoma got the feeling that many would prefer the twins with their demure appearance. Still, people always envied that which they lacked, and to the twins, Dilphina's blessings must have seemed much more important than they truly were. The grass was always greener on the other side, as they said.

But, if that's the case, it's kind of strange how they get along with Leone, then. I don't get it...

The redheaded mercenary known as the Crimson Lioness was graced with neither the mature allure nor the ardent demurity of the other women in Ryoma's circle. She was an attractive woman, but she didn't accentuate her looks. Also, her vivacious personality came across as somewhat masculine. She'd called Ryoma "boy" since the very beginning of their relationship, and she took pleasure in poking fun and teasing him. In that regard, she and the twins were as different as oil and water.

Despite that, the Malfist twins didn't display any sense of rivalry toward her. They would argue with her at times, but overall, they seemed to get along well together.

Well, we've got tomorrow to think about, and we'll need countermeasures in place so we can protect against that one issue. There's no need to handle this right now, but someday...

The bigger the organization, the harder it was for all of its members to get along. That depended on how one defined "getting along," though, and there were exceptions in small numbers. Ryoma saw it as if it were a school. Just because someone went to the same school, that didn't mean they'd remember each other's names and faces. Some people couldn't even recall their own classmates' names. But if the list was narrowed down to schoolmates they considered friends, then there was a much higher chance they'd get along.

One could befriend some people, but they couldn't befriend their entire school. It was said that a clique only needed three people,

which spoke to the way the human heart worked. Appearing to get along with everyone might seem respectable, but realistically, it was impossible to befriend everyone.

If people couldn't get along with their fellow man, how could they befriend the demi-humans? Ryoma's ideal was for humans to coexist with the demi-humans, but he knew getting there would be a long and arduous journey. Besides, before he could even start working on such idealistic aspirations, he needed to resolve his mountain of tasks first.

The biggest concern is what happens tomorrow.

Ryoma looked around at the people surrounding the round table and began speaking gravely.

"First, Signus and Robert. You know what your plans for tomorrow are, right?"

Signus and Robert exchanged looks, then turned to Ryoma. After handling security for the evening party the other night, they'd been given two major duties. First, they were to appear as witnesses alongside Lady Yulia to discuss the war between the Salzberg county and the Mikoshiba barony. Second, they were to guard Ryoma's entourage as they returned to Sirius once the trial had concluded.

I guess there isn't much to worry about with the questioning part. They'll just state the facts.

The fact of the matter was that the ten houses of the north had sent spies into Ryoma's land, though the Igasaki clan's counterintelligence had thwarted their attempts. In addition, Ryoma's stated cause for the war—that he did it in the name of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria—was difficult to disprove.

Ryoma's demand that the northern houses transfer command of their troops to him was an unusual request from a Rhoadserian noble, so it would've been easy to interpret that as intentional provocation on his part. However, his claim that Count Salzberg and the ten houses didn't shift any troops away from the north was also true.

They'd had an excuse—they couldn't afford to weaken the north's garrisons—so no one had demanded they take responsibility for not participating in the civil war. Their inaction wasn't a problem so long as Count Salzberg, one of the mightiest warriors in Rhoadseria, was still at large.

Defending the northern border was important, but even if it hadn't been able to send any soldiers to help, the Salzberg county had still boasted significant military might. Count Salzberg could have deployed a small force of knights to help, or he could have sent his famous Twin Blades, Signus and Robert, to assist with the civil war.

Despite this, Count Salzberg didn't move a single soldier to help during the civil war, so it came as no surprise that his loyalty to the kingdom had been called into question. It made Ryoma's claim that

Count Salzberg and the rest of the ten houses were neglecting their noble duty that much more credible.

Theoretically, Ryoma's argument was consistent enough, but it was merely his side of the story. Thankfully, there was no one left alive to testify against this. After all, the ten houses' heirs had either been killed in the war or forced to shoulder their defeat and, on paper, end their own lives. Saying they were executed was closer to the truth, but it honestly didn't matter much.

The few who'd survived among the ten houses, starting with Lady Yulia, had all sworn loyalty to Ryoma by now. All of them, like Signus and Robert, had been on bad terms with their families. Their fathers and siblings had hated them, and they'd never been given a chance to exhibit their true worth. Ryoma had been the one to free them from the shackles of their sorrowful circumstances, and they felt no desire to betray him.

The problem is what comes next. If Queen Lupis and Meltina really are behind the other night's attack, I wish I could bring more soldiers with me. Breaking out of the palace with such a limited number feels like a gamble.

Signus and Robert were both powerful warriors, and they'd served as Count Salzberg's personal guards many times. Ryoma had chosen the best in terms of ability and merit, and he had absolute trust in them, but he couldn't shake his anxiety. At the evening party, they weren't sure if they'd be attacked, but this time they knew that combat was unavoidable. Plus, the Mikoshiba barony had very few allies in Pireas, so if fighting were to break out in earnest, it was highly unlikely any reinforcements would come to their aid.

With that in mind, the Twin Blades would be paramount to the success of Ryoma's ploy tomorrow, and they knew it too. All the same, their attitude toward this important role was the polar opposite of Ryoma's.

"Yes, we understand perfectly, my lord," Signus said, his voice full of respect and politeness.

"Everything's gonna go according to your instructions, boss," Robert added. He didn't talk like a vassal, but rather an employee addressing his superior at work.

Robert's tone would have been acceptable in some back-alley tavern, but it was unexpected in a noble's mansion. Depending on the place and the people involved, he could be sentenced to death for his disrespect. Ryoma wasn't stupid enough to reprimand Robert over ill manners, though. If outsiders had been watching this exchange, it might have been worth a remark, but everyone present was in Ryoma's inner circle. Either way, Robert's value was too great to be tarnished by just his attitude.

Some people, on the other hand, weren't satisfied with that.

“Robert, what’s wrong with you?!” Signus cried.



Signus had gotten to his feet and was shouting at Robert, who sat opposite of him, but it was clear that he wasn't seriously mad at Robert. This was mostly a performance specifically for Ryoma and his comrades. He probably assumed that speaking out would have fewer repercussions than Ryoma scolding Robert for his behavior. Moreover, as newcomers, they needed to make a good impression with the long-standing members of the group. Robert was one of Signus's few friends, and Signus didn't want to see him expelled over a minor misunderstanding.

Ryoma raised a hand, stopping Signus. "Aah, it's all good. Really. I know we're in the middle of a war council, but everyone here is in my inner circle. You can be at ease too, Signus."

Signus bowed his head slightly and settled back into his seat.

Ryoma didn't much mind how Robert spoke to him—within reason and good taste, and depending on the time and place. If they were in the palace or at a party with guests, one of his retainers calling him "boss" would have reflected poorly on Ryoma. But otherwise, Robert's calling him by that name was an inconsequential quirk. As a matter of fact, Lione still called him "boy," and Boltz called him "lad."

Although Robert is a bit eccentric and contrarian, he's still an educated noble. He knows how to read the room.

If Robert wanted to, he could be perfectly polite. Ryoma and a commoner like Lione could even benefit from his instruction on decorum and etiquette. Nonetheless, that wasn't to say there were no problems whatsoever.

Friction between newcomers and seniors, eh? It's not much of a problem right now, but...

Lione was one of the Mikoshiba barony's highest-ranking leaders, and of the people in this room, she was second only to the Malfist sisters in terms of how long she'd served under Ryoma. She was a senior member of his inner circle. Her position was by no means similar to Robert's—she'd fought against him in the last war—even if they were both Ryoma's retainers.

Signus is the voice of reason, while Robert's more quirky. Their skills are exceptional, and looking at everyone's reactions, Lione's included, no one seems to mind them too much. All that's left is for me to put them to good use.

Clashes between newcomers and senior members have been known to break up a group. One of a leader's most important duties was properly handling this friction.

Having finished all the arrangements, Ryoma declared the meeting adjourned, and everyone began leaving the room one by one.

They had to attend to their final preparations for tomorrow. One person, however, remained in her seat.

Ryoma turned to Helena, who silently gazed back at him. She let the silence hang between them for a few moments before she spoke.

“You’ve gone with quite the extreme play here,” she said, her voice full of conflict and sorrow.

As far as Rhoadseria’s Ivory Goddess of War was concerned, she didn’t fully agree with Ryoma’s plan for tomorrow. Her tone wasn’t critical, though, indicating that she understood Ryoma was acting out of necessity.

“You don’t like it?” Ryoma asked. “Slaying Lupis Rhoadserians... Even if you realize that’s the best way to protect this country’s people?”

There was no guilt or doubt in his eyes; Ryoma was speaking with clarity. He’d all but decided on his future course, and he wasn’t acting out of pretense.

He really believes he has the qualifications and the right to commit regicide, thought Helena. *He said it with resolve, determination, and confidence.*

Ever since Lupis Rhoadserians had tried to trap Ryoma in the Wortenia Peninsula, Helena had the feeling that this day would eventually come, yet she couldn’t deny that some part of her had thought it wouldn’t ever come to this.

“Yes, well, ever since it was decided that I’d attend the evening party, I was prepared for this to happen. It’s just that...honestly speaking, I still have my misgivings...”

With that said, Helena gazed out the window. A cloudless blue sky stretched as far as she could see. It was so vast and boundless that just looking up at it gave one the impression they were a bird, flying freely through its expanse.



“Such fine weather... And it’s so different from how I feel,” Helena muttered, her voice feeble.

Ryoma nodded. “Yeah, indeed.”

He could understand the conflict and doubt gripping Helena’s heart, and he knew his choices were what had planted those misgivings in her, but no matter how Helena felt about this, Ryoma had his position to consider.

I wish I could avoid this, but I can’t.

Ryoma was acting to protect himself and his comrades. He’d have avoided stooping to these measures if he could, but if that wasn’t an option, he wasn’t going to shy away from doing what had to be done. Besides, this situation wasn’t Ryoma’s fault. This all started when Lupis Rhoadserians gave in to her weakness and broke her promise to Ryoma.

That would just sound like an excuse to Helena, though. She’d devoted her very life to the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, and Ryoma couldn’t say anything else. He got the feeling that trying to placate her with some kind of excuse would just come across as an insult, so he simply bowed his head to Helena and left the room.

Seeing him off, Helena heaved a sigh as she remained all alone in the room.

“To protect this country’s people, he says... Yes, I know. I know what’s the best path, the path we have to take...but what will become of Queen Lupis as a result of that?”

Helena understood Ryoma’s ideals, as well as the severe, realistic, and novel means with which he made them a reality. That was why she’d acted as per Ryoma’s request and added her signature to the note included with the evening party’s invitations, alongside the Counts Bergstone and Zeleph. She was prepared to see this through to the bitter end.

At least, she was...until a few days ago.

When I got this...

She took out an envelope from her pocket. The letter and silver locket contained within it were what shook her resolve. Helena undid the locket’s fastener and opened the charm. Inside was a small portrait of Helena Steiner, drawn over a decade ago by the famed Rhoadserian palace painter. She’d gone to great lengths to have this portrait made, and only two copies of it existed in this world.

Helena’s heart tightened as she thought of the name of the man who’d sent this letter.

Akitake Sudou... Just who is he?

Originally, Helena knew Sudou as one of Princess Radine’s

personal attendants, but now she knew him as a mysterious man with relations to both Mikhail Vanash and Viscount Gelhart. She was also aware that he was suspected of being involved with the organization Julianus I had warned Ryoma about when he was in the Kingdom of Xarooda.

That man had sent her a letter. Normally, she would have ignored it and discarded it right away, but she couldn't do this time, because the pendant it contained was a birthday present she'd given to her beloved daughter, Saria Steiner.

At the time, Saria always kept the locket on her person, praying for her mother's safety on the battlefield. She always had it on...until the day she was abducted.

I'm sorry...

To whom did Helena direct that apology? To Ryoma Mikoshiba, the man she once acknowledged as her lord? Or to her daughter, who'd died a gruesome death because of her mother's political struggles?

Helena couldn't answer that question right now. She remained seated and looked up at the clear sky outside the window. She prayed that come tonight, when she met with Akitake Sudou, she would have her answer.



The following day, a few carriages passed through the gates of Count Salzburg's estate, accompanied by fifty knights in full armor. It looked like they were marching out to battle. The carriages were all painted a refined black, and the horses towing them were healthy steeds with sleek manes, implying that they were well-bred and looked after.

The carriages did look like high-class vehicles, but overall, they were sturdy, imposing, and menacing. If nothing else, they weren't what a noble would take on a pleasure ride. It stood to reason they would be so imposing, though, since the House of Lords had sent them exclusively for "transporting the nobility." In other words, they were a convoy to transport prisoners.

The sky fit the carriages' austere appearance. In stark contrast to the previous day's weather, it looked like it could rain at any second. It was like the sky was hinting at what was to come.

Ryoma looked up at the heavens.

These clouds look pretty bad. Looks like it'll rain soon. I just hope it's a good omen.

Of course, no matter what the weather was, Ryoma's plans wouldn't change. Be it cloudy or sunny, he would do what he had to as scheduled. Still, it was human nature to believe in superstition, and

the only question Ryoma considered was whether this rain would be a good omen for him.

In Japan's Warring States period, Motonari Mori, who laid the foundation for the Mori clan's future supremacy, made the leap from a mere local ruler to a warlord by winning the Battle of Itsukushima. He fought in the midst of a typhoon and, in so doing, defeated the armies of Harukata Sue despite his numerical disadvantage.

Likewise, Gyuichi Ota's record of the life of Nobunaga Oda, the *Shincho Koki*, describes the Battle of Okehazama, when overwhelming rain obstructed the soldiers' line of sight. This description was the basis for the theory of Nobunaga Oda's successful surprise attack against Yoshimoto Imagawa.

In those two examples, rain was a favorable omen before a battle. However, it was just a theory. It was hard to tell what really happened. History was written by the victorious, and winners tended to twist the facts in a way that painted them in a positive light.

Even if there was no malicious fabrication involved, human memory could be faulty. People were prone to forgetfulness and misunderstanding even in the most mundane matters. Moreover, the means of passing down information during the Warring States period were lacking. From a modern perspective, those means were mostly unreliable, be it letters or recitation.

With those considerations in mind, it was hard to tell if it really did rain during the Battles of Itsukushima and Okehazama. And even if it did, there was no way of knowing if it influenced or hinted at anything. One could only make assumptions.

In the end, what kind of omen this is will be up to personal interpretation. Well, I say that, but here I am, worrying about it...

As he thought about that, Ryoma walked along the red carpet spread in the entrance hall of Count Salzberg's estate. Laura and Sara followed a few steps behind him, clad in maid's outfits, and Lady Yulia, Robert, and the others followed behind them.

Much like the evening party, they were all dressed in formal attire. Even Lione was dressed in an outfit that made her look like a knight. After all, in modern Japan, a subpoena from the House of Lords was like a call from the company's main office requesting an employee's presence. Though the House of Lords stated that they wished to confirm the details of the incident, it was more like Ryoma was being called to court, so they couldn't very well show up in casual clothes.

Ryoma too, as their leader, was dressed differently than usual. Instead of his regular all-black outfit, he was dressed in a lacy shirt, similar to the one he wore to the evening party, with a jacket and coat over it. That said, this outfit was also all black, owing to Ryoma's

tastes.

To a noble, this outfit would seem plain, but silvery and golden threads were embroidered on the sleeve cuffs, giving the ensemble a subdued but dignified feel. The lack of ornaments, coupled with Kikoku's black sheath hanging at his waist, made him look more refined. He appeared unaffected and sincere, but also strong.

Ryoma's guards and the estate's servants regarded him with an excitement they rarely displayed. Ryoma, on the other hand, felt very uncomfortable and out of his element in this attire.

This is a baron's outfit, huh? With this and what I wore to the evening party, I can tell those two didn't cut corners with the clothes they got me...but I still feel out of place.

Ryoma had never cared much for clothes to begin with. He wouldn't walk around in dirty or holey garments, but he wasn't the kind to care for brands or browse fashion magazines for the newest trends. If he had the time and money to waste on clothes and decorations, he'd much rather spend them on training or a nice meal.

Whenever he hung out with Asuka, who was interested in fashion as girls her age often were, they'd always ended up arguing. But that was just when he was a high school student in Japan. After he was summoned to this world and received a baron's title, Ryoma realized the importance of dressing properly. This was why he'd asked Lady Yulia to have clothes custom made for him in Epirus.

It should be fine. This outfit's quality matches its price.

Ryoma had paid a hefty price for the tailoring—more than a commoner's yearly income, for sure, and a sum that would make even a viscount or a count hesitate—but it was very much worth its price.

Ryoma arrived at the carriage that had stopped in front of the estate's entrance. A man walked toward him, the knights parting to allow him to pass. He looked to be in his midforties, and he was wearing a judge's gown. He was apparently a staff member of the House of Lords deployed to bring Ryoma along.

The man bowed respectfully. "You are Baron Ryoma Mikoshiba, yes? I am Douglas Hamilton. I have the privilege of serving as your guide today."

Ryoma narrowed his eyes and scrutinized the man.

He's probably a bailiff. What a nasty expression, though.

At first glance, the man's smile was cordial, and his attitude was respectable. He didn't openly show any enmity toward Ryoma, at least. But there was something else, something foreign in his pleasant smile. It was very light, a nearly indiscernible sense of unease. Douglas was probably hiding it well, but it seeped out into his expression—a nasty one that was perhaps a reflection of his true nature.

Ryoma couldn't completely discern a person's nature just by looking at them, but he'd experienced a lot since coming to this world. Douglas was the kind of man Ryoma wanted nothing to do with. Still, the House of Lords had sent him, so Ryoma was in no position to ignore him.

In which case...

If he couldn't reject this man's involvement, his only recourse was to greet him cordially.

"I see. I leave myself in your capable hands, then," Ryoma said, putting his right hand into his inner pocket. He then took it out and extended it to Douglas.

For a moment, Douglas seemed cautious. He was a bailiff dispatched by the House of Lords, but his social status was by no means high. He was part of the nobility, and it was possible he'd eventually inherit a title, but his position was far below that of a baron. What's more, in Rhoadseria, bailiffs were responsible for maintaining law and order within the court itself, and they were also charged with escorting prisoners and other miscellaneous matters. While he was in a position that administered justice, his station was significantly lower compared to that of a judge.

Douglas had gone through many unpleasant experiences in the past, so Ryoma's positive attitude came as a surprise. Regardless, he couldn't ignore Ryoma's extended hand; Ryoma wasn't officially a criminal yet.

Catching on to Ryoma's intent, Douglas silently extended his hand. "Yes. Now, if you could make your way to the carriages...they'll take you to the House of Lords."

A few seconds later, Douglas retracted his hand and opened the door to a nearby carriage so as to usher Ryoma inside. He seemed to be feigning composure, but based on how his right hand was fidgeting restlessly, it seemed he was confirming the contents of the pouch Ryoma left in his palm.

Good, Ryoma thought to himself. I don't know who sent this man or what he's planning, but this should make him a bit more careless. And if I'm wrong and this guy really is just a corrupt official, this isn't too bad either. But his last name, Hamilton, does bother me a little.

Bribing officials was immoral, yet money was the lubricating oil that enabled smooth negotiations in this world. If upholding justice placed one at a disadvantage, then knowing when to offer a little bribe could be seen as savvy. Nevertheless, Ryoma wasn't under the slightest impression that bribing Douglas would soften him up or make him steer things in Ryoma's favor. Even if it did, there wasn't much a mere bailiff could do to help him.

No, the important part was that he'd given Douglas a false

impression. The bribe would convince Douglas that Ryoma thought he had Douglas in his pocket. Thinking that Ryoma had the wrong idea about him could cause Douglas to slip up and reveal something.

Ryoma got into the carriage and closed his eyes. He then ran his fingers over Kikoku's sheath, caressing it. As he did, a gust of wind billowed through the carriage—though its windows were closed—as if answering Ryoma.

The sound of the wind was like that of a wailing woman.

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who've kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

With the Corona crisis going on since last year, my environment has been changing quite a bit and making life difficult. But thankfully, I was able to deliver volume 16 to you. I greatly appreciate the fact that readers are still picking up this series despite the trying times we live in. Allow me to take this chance to thank everyone.

I'm sure many of you have had your lives turn upside down because of the Covid crisis. It has shaken up my lifestyle quite a bit over the last few months. In terms of my personal life, get-togethers where I would meet with friends to drink had to be put off until further notice, and I had to eat my meals alone or with only a small number of people.

My hobby was going to see movies several times a month, but over the last four months, I haven't had a chance to do so. Shows I was looking forward to watching had to be postponed. All of these were shocking changes for me.

As for my job, I was able to telecommute from home, but even this has been fraught with difficulties. I work in the IT industry and have some knowledge about working remotely. I was well aware of arguments for and against using the internet like this, but experiencing it myself as an everyday routine really showed me how different reality was from the stories.

As it turns out, video conferences and chats are quite troublesome! Things that can be done by simply getting up from your desk to ask someone now have to be resolved by checking their online schedule and assigning them a task. It's not so bad when you get used to it, but it's very sudden, and it's hard to say it's well suited to the nature of our work.

Still, if it's possible to avoid commuting to work until a vaccine or a cure is developed, it's probably for the best that we do. But I suppose that's not an issue that should bother a low-grade employee like me...

But let's put such gloomy matters aside. In volume 16, our hero Ryoma finally arrives in the capital, Pireas, for his hearing, but since

the people of the capital hate him, he's met with harassment at every turn. He's not childish enough to let his anger get the better of him, but that's not to say he's temperate enough to let his abusers get away without retribution either. Still, he knows to act according to the situation and let it slide.

Unfortunately, his maturity only makes those around him more suspicious. Mikhail's ploy turns Ryoma's dinner party at Count Salzberg's estate into a scene of bloodshed. This is probably the highlight of this volume.

In addition, we have a new character named Kikuna Samejima. How will she act? And there's also our beloved old lady, Helena, who's placed in a terrible conflict of interest. Quite a lot happens in volume 16, so do look forward to it.

Lastly, allow me to thank all the people involved with this book's publishing, and all the readers who picked up this book. Thank you very, very much! Please continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*.









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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 16

by Ryota Hori

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